

# **Brand Communities around Finnish Companies**

A qualitative study of marketing professionals' perception

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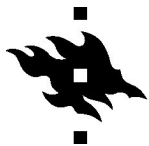
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<b>Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract</b> <p>Modern consumers and marketers commonly perceive the concept of brand community as a social formation that exists in symbiosis with organizations behind different brands. However, many researchers question whether community branding remains engaged and aligned with the brand's agenda. Moreover, existing literature fails to explore the role of individual marketers in building the relationship between brands and communities. To compensate for this omission, this study investigates the perception of brand communities conveyed by marketing professionals who have worked at several Finnish companies in four different industries.</p> <p>The research questions were the following: How do marketing employees at Finnish companies perceive brand communities? What do interviewees think about the relationship between brand communities and companies?</p> <p>The data used in the study consists of semi-structured interviews of six marketing professionals collected during face-to-face meetings. The data were thematically analysed: the texts were first coded according to the predetermined topics (interviewees' feelings about brand communities; relationship between the community and the brand; life inside a brand community), after which the themes that emerged from the topics were studied further. Three themes were detected: participants feel distant from all brand communities; the relationship between brand communities and companies is symbiotic; the profile of brand communities in the eyes of brand managers is incomplete and blurry. The presentation of the findings is guided by the constructivism paradigm.</p> <p>The analysis revealed that participants' perception of the subject is categorically complex, yet it lacks a critical perspective and insight on what may drive people to participate in brand communities. Marketing professionals shared their experiences of being lurking members and observers of brand communities. The data also indicate that interviewees do not identify themselves with most brand communities. The analysis also indicates that there may be a conflict of values between brand representatives and how they perceive brand community members' values.</p>			
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# **1. Introduction**

Brand communities have become a widespread phenomenon and changed the way people interact with each other and organisations (Humphrey, Laverie and Rinaldo, 2015). A brand community is “a specialised, non-geographically bound group, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand. Some of these communities are nurtured by companies that sponsor real-world, offline events to encourage enthusiasm about their products” (Solomon, 2003). A community becomes a brand community when the primary uniting factor is a brand or brand consumption (Humphrey, Laverie and Rinaldo, 2015), as opposed to a generic hobby, occupation, or another base of identification such as geographic proximity. A popular example of a brand with a community around it is Apple (Özbölük and Dursun, 2017). Apple is widely known for its devoted customers who engage with the company’s latest releases and tries to persuade others around them to become enthusiastic about the brand. Alongside large, widely known international brands such as Apple, communities constantly emerge around small, local, and niche brands.

The question of how to develop brand communities has been concerning companies while brand fans seek new ways to enjoy their passions, to connect with like-minded people and to have new experiences. At the same time, the more digital platforms and tools become available, the more diverse brand communities become. New patterns of engagement are related to activism and participation, which makes them crucial for understanding changing society. This chapter introduces the research angle, questions to be answered and design that helps to understand brand communities better.

## **1.1. Problem**

This study focuses on the reflection of brand communities in the eyes of marketing professionals related to managing brand communities at their companies. This section introduces the motivation behind choosing the topic of this thesis and the study’s background. I also pose research questions and the research design tailored to find the answers. I then outline the theoretical framework and describe the structure of the thesis.

Marketing is a key part of a firm's business strategy aimed at boosting revenue. In the digital age, enterprises pay an increasing amount of attention to promoting their brands and services in the digital space, including promotion in brand communities. Promotional activities aimed at brand community development can be seen as a way of making existing customers more loyal. This can be achieved by enhancing the communication between companies and their target audience, making them feel close and connected.

Brand communities have been getting a lot of interest from scholars as well as the employees of commercial organisations. The latter seek current recommendations on brand community management strategies which can be derived from the discussed cases. Marketing practices in general and brand communities, in particular, have been mostly researched from a practical angle. The research in the field of communication benefits from the investigation of this problem in the form of new knowledge about branded communities when the subject is examined with a critical approach and from a new angle. This is the angle of this study that aims to increase diversity in the discussion.

## **1.2. Research questions**

The study focuses on brand communities as seen through the eyes of communications professionals. The problem that this research aims to address is what the marketing employees of a few Finnish companies think of brand communities, what interviewees consider important for all stakeholders, i.e. community members, companies, and themselves. This is an important problem to investigate because the interviewees are the agents who design and execute the company's brand community strategy and the services for the community. Therefore, what interviewees think of brand communities shapes the way brand communities are managed. Previous research mostly focuses on the impact of brand communities, for example, on consumer behaviour or the company-consumer relationship, as well as practical implications that would help enterprises nourish such communities. This study's analysis focuses on what marketing professionals, the agents that manage brand communities, think about the phenomenon. This study's research questions are:

RQ 1: How do marketing employees at Finnish companies perceive brand communities?

RQ 1.1: What do interviewees think about the relationship between brand communities and companies?

The study tackled the chosen problem using these questions as the directions for the research methodology. I explain what research methods I choose in order to address these questions further. Since the aim is to find out the thoughts of certain people, the posed research questions require a qualitative approach to data analysis. This thesis's goal is also to make a distinction between the real world and the thoughts of the research participants, making the results reliable and replicable at the same time. Another feature of this research design is relying on data rather than initial hypotheses when conducting the analysis in order to achieve higher reliability and replicability of the study. Such an approach allows the data and analysis to lead to the results and conclusions that could not have been predicted, yet they reflect the state of the studied subject.

### **1.3. Research framework**

This section provides an overview of the theoretical concepts relevant to brand communities and the angle of this study. The theoretical framework demonstrates how this research relates to what has been previously done in the field and why the posed research problem needs to be investigated.

This study's theoretical framework is based on the overlap of two interest areas. The studies of branded communities go back to the theories of audiences and communities, the cornerstones of sociology. Communities have been studied as media audiences in the past. At the same time, community studies have been overlapping with other societal issues such as politics, economics, media, and communication etc. The trend that has been present for a while now shows that research focuses on the changing nature of communities in the context of new digital communication media. The principal question scholars ask is how different communities as a form of relationship between people change in the new environment. This study analyses brand communities as new and widespread types of communities to find out what they give to individuals and companies. This thesis aims to

contribute to this discussion in the context of the interaction between marketing professionals and brand communities.

The second research interest area is related to studies of promotional culture and practical business literature. The literature pertaining to promotional culture originated from interest in the power of propaganda in the political and commercial sphere and the cultural changes it spurred. Later, as the commercial sphere was developing, there were more and more studies about firms' promotional activities towards the general public and specific groups. Now, companies saw the value in targeting communities with specific interests to increase revenues, and there is a demand for literature on the best practices. At the same time, the problem scholars are investigating is how far promotional culture has come, how it affects everything from relationships between people to climate change. This thesis aims to contribute to this discussion in the context of branded communities, as seen by interviewees.

#### **1.4. Thesis structure**

The study is divided into six chapters. In the introductory section, the research problem and research questions are posed and put in the context of preceding studies in this field. In the following chapter, I review the literature from the field of communication and sociology as well as business literature on brand communities in the context of marketing and promotion culture. In this section, the most important concepts related to this thesis are presented. In the Methods chapter, I describe the research design and strategy, the motivation behind choosing them, as well as data collection, sampling, processing, and analysis methods. Furthermore, methodological choices are connected to the goal of the research. In the Analysis chapter, the results in relation to research questions are presented in line with the data structure. In the Discussion chapter, the analysis results are interpreted in relation to the existing literature that set the frame for this study, and the limitations of this study are estimated. The thesis is concluded by the summary of how the research design helped to tackle the research problem, questions and the main findings and what future research directions are suggested.



## **2. Literature review**

This chapter contains an overview of the most important concepts and approaches previously developed in the literature relevant to brand communities. I review the concept of community in the context of networked society and consumer society as well as the focus of recent research on brand communities specifically. This chapter compares the business-oriented perspective, and the critical perspective towards promotional culture, in order to define the interests of different stakeholders related to brand communities. Literature review helps to identify the gap in the knowledge about brand communities and people managing them, situating this piece of research in the academic discussion.

### **2.1. Virtual community theories**

In sociological research, the term community has been used to describe a wide range of phenomena. As Goe and Noonan (2007, p. 455) summarise Gusfield (1975, pp. xv–xvi), one of the two most frequently used descriptions of a community characterises human relationships that make people form groups. Goe and Noonan (2007, p. 460) provide a summary of the flow of the online community research. The social network analysis approach was a trend, which is based on the image of the community as a “network of primary relationships among a set of social actors,” Goe and Noonan (2007, p. 460) write. Later, academics focused on the development of communities in the context of online communication and the transition of communities from the system based on groups to the system of networked societies. In addition to that, readings on brand communities tend to present them as a completely new phenomenon, brand communities are often discussed in the context of business, marketing, or advertising rather than classic sociology. Such readings are reviewed later in this chapter. In my analysis and discussion of results, I look at brand communities as communities in the traditional sense, and the literature I review at the beginning of this chapter lays the ground for the entire study.

An academic discussion has been going on around online communities. Rheingold (2000) argues that virtual community has become a new type of social formation. According to Rheingold’s definition Castells (2010, p. 386) cites, virtual community is a “self-defined

electronic network of interactive communication organised around a shared interest or purpose”. The most popular questions that are being asked by online community researchers are:

- How are online communities different from the offline formations?
- How are the behaviour patterns different in both?

At the same time, Castells (2010) sees virtual communities as traditional groups of people that have been put in a new setting, an internet-penetrated interactive society. His concept of the networked, or interactive society stems from such communities. According to the review by Goe and Noonan (2007, p. 460), Hampton and Wellman (2002) approached the Internet communities as “important social networks but not particularly special or separate from other aspects of social life” such as shared communities, neighbourhoods, and face-to-face interactions.

It is important to note that one trend in the literature about virtual communities has been diversifying “real-life” communities and virtual ones. For example, this approach is reflected in the reading by Bandopadhyaya (2016); he refers to the tradition of the imagined community and connects it to the fact that social media made international communities of people who might never meet offline possible implying that virtual, imagined communities are not as significant as the “real-life” ones. I disagree with this approach and argue that everything that humans do is part of their real lives regardless of where they interact with others — at work, in the street or using an online messenger on their smartphone. From the social constructivist viewpoint that guides this research, people construct reality based on what they “imagine”. Additionally, all communities help people to find their identities and create value. Therefore, the importance of online and imagined communities cannot be diminished. I use this angle to analyse the cases selected for this research, more of which is to be discussed in the analysis chapter.

The question of what value communities bring to their members has been extensively covered in the older literature. According to Maslow (1943), the needs for self-actualization and esteem emerge after the primary, physical needs are satisfied. Psychological needs, in other words, are crucial for one’s wellbeing, and participating in an offline or a virtual community fulfils some of them. Castells (2010) sees virtual

communities as traditional groups of people that have been put in a new setting, an Internet-penetrated environment. His concept of the networked, or interactive society stems from it. Castells (2009, pp. 68-69) talks about contemporary cultural communities formed on religious, national, and territorial basis. The scholar describes such communities as the primary alternative to the construction of meaning in society. According to Castells (2009, p. 68), this new meaning is important to find for those who are deprived of “the individualisation of identity attached to life in the global networks of power and wealth”. In other words, being part of a community remains a meaningful and crucial part of self-identity for modern citizens. Here is how Castells describes the meaning of communities:

They appear as reactions to prevailing social trends, which are resisted on behalf of autonomous sources of meaning. They are, at the outset, defensive identities that function as refuge and solidarity, to protect against a hostile outside world. They are culturally constituted; that is, organized around a specific set of values whose meaning and sharing are marked by specific codes of self-identification: the community of believers, the icons of nationalism, the geography of locality.

This argument can be interpreted as the following: the users who join virtual communities try to take back the control over the world — because the world has become too big and should be shrunk back to the size of the humans. Brint (2001) compares two lines of development of the community concept created by Toennies ([1887] 1957) and Durkheim ([1897] 1951) and lists what makes people want to join communities. For example, it is the search of identity or desire to have frequent interactions and form emotional bonds. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) mention that consumption communities are formed by communal affiliation for consumers. At the same time, studies about brand communities specifically tend to list the features of brand communities focusing on the aftermath of being a member of one rather than what makes people join a community in the first place. For example, Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) write about “three essential markers of community (consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility)” that they found present in the brand communities they analysed.

This decentralisation and democratisation of mass communication affects all kinds of communities, including consumer communities. Diamond and Plattner (2012) claim that information and communication technologies can be rightly called the “liberation technology” because they “extend political, social, and economic freedom” applicable to all spheres of life. On the one hand, consumers became able to shape some important parts of their lives such as participating in online communities devoted to their favourite brands to purchase. On the other hand, the influence of businesses on consumers has caused a critical reaction which is discussed in the next section.

A trend in research has been focusing on the impact of promotional communication in the context of the political and commercial sphere. The trend started with the interest in the political sphere with Edward Bernays’ *Propaganda* (1928), continued with studies of advertising and promotional culture (Wernick, 1991) as commercialisation was progressing. Communities turned into target audiences for the organisations willing to reach them. Aronczyk and Powers (2010, p. 13) refer to “the rise of the “competitive personality” that took place in the second half of the XX century; a few decades later, “culture became industry, personhood became personality, and advertising overtook sociality, society was subjected to repression and control, while confectionery distractions and desires functioned as unconscious tools of seduction and manipulation,” they write. Marwick and Boyd (2011, p. 16) cite Baym (1999) and Jenkins (2005) regarding the audiences as co-creators of promotional materials:

The idea of the “audience” as a stable entity that congregates around a media object has been displaced with the “interpretive community”, “fandom”, and “participatory culture”, concepts that assume small, active, and highly engaged groups of people who don’t just consume content but produce their own as well.

Marwick and Boyd (2011, p. 16) argue that communities became one facet of the network of small niche audiences that the new media era is characterised by. Moreover, audiences in general and, by extension, communities have also become an asset for both media and non-media companies. “Businesses tap into user information to transform users into digital audience labour and commodities sellable to advertisers,” Henry and Benedette (2017)

claim. Although, I argue that nowadays audiences are not a commodity just for media companies. Regardless of industry, it matters for any company how many followers the organisation has on social media, and how many people visit the blog or the website. For a commercial organisation, having their own online audience creates the opportunity to market products to it directly, without relying on advertising on a third party's platform, as well as supporting the company's positive image in public relations. Having brand communities around a company serves this purpose.

Since firms have changed their relationship with the audience, organisations also exchanged their role as the content producer with the audience as the content consumer. Now, the audiences can produce and share content, and corporations can sometimes use the content for their benefit. For example, companies ask their followers on social media to leave comments and questions on social media, send feedback about the product etc. Aronczyk and Powers (2010, pp. 9-10) call this "the act of putting communication to work". According to Anderson (1993) who Aronczyk and Powers refer to, resulting in part from the business-related processes, "imagined communities" with their own forms of interpretation and evaluation" emerge. Such formations appear as a consequence of the circulation of cultural activities, from reading books to the global movement of financial derivatives. Imagined communities form around the brands and their products also. Firms see imagined communities as a possible commodity that needs to be taken "advantage" of which ends into gaining social media followers and thus measuring the success of the strategy.

Some brand customers become fans if they agree with the image created by the brand and are deeply involved with the company's activities (Lee and Jung, 2018). When a firm gains a group of fans, it may become able to take advantage of word-of-mouth marketing. Serazio (2013, p. 102) describes this phenomenon as an expression of "productive tendencies" in consumers and online users:

Word-of-mouth marketing seems to take its cues from these hives of grassroots activity, channelling and capitalizing on crowd-contributions. This "free labour" is, at once, gratuitous and also autonomous, both of which help make it a ready resource

for a structure of governance (advertising) ever in need of authenticity and, with it, legitimization on the cheap.

In other words, after the company invests financial, time, and labour resources into promoting its products or services, loyal consumers might turn into fans and start doing the promotional work themselves. Sometimes these loyal customers require monetary reward, in some cases the feeling of being important, influential, and aware of the company's activities and plans better than anyone else (Serazio, 2013). The new media create opportunities and encourage user participation and their collaboration with organisations: "By communicating with others about the importance of the brand to their lives, consumers become promotional intermediaries themselves" (Aronczyk and Powers, 2010, p. 10). In the online setting, it is more reasonable to recruit word-of-mouth agents using non-monetary remuneration since there might be an unpredictable number of followers. For instance, IT companies invite the users of their software products or applications to share the link to the program on their social media pages or send it to their acquaintances directly. User engagement in content and idea creation is exploited widely also. It gives the participants that very feeling of being able to influence the business model of the company they like. As Serazio (2013, pp. 103-104) states:

The philosophical shift in brand management from authority to partnership (the marketer's onus), from compulsion to discovery (the advertising ethos), and from passivity to agency (the consumer's proscribed role).

Raisinghani (2008) suggested a classification of virtual communities according to the basic human needs. In this classification, there are virtual communities of five types: relationship, place, mind or interest, memory, and transaction. Online brand communities can be mapped using this classification depending on the brand that united users and the product or service behind it. For example, a community around a makeup and skincare company Tarte Cosmetics is a community of interest; the travellers who use Airbnb to find accommodation form a community of transaction. For the purposes of this study, it is important to understand the context that brands create for fans. Aronczyk and Powers (2010, p. 10) write about such versatile capabilities of the brand such as to frame

relationships both economic and social; to represent, communicate, and circulate forms of value; and to create and capture modes of attention. These capabilities, Aronczyk and Powers (2010, p. 10), explain:

Make for striking parallels with the digital technologies that currently dominate and assimilate the mediated environment. Not only does the impact of the brand rely on the technological changes that have destabilized and converged mediated communications, especially over the last decade; the brand is also itself a technology of communication and a product of that changed environment.

In other words, the opportunities that the firms get when they become open to communicating with online audiences and offering people to talk on their platforms are endless. At the same time, consumers get a platform to express themselves in certain ways, connect with like-minded people, get a chance to request the products or services they lack, promote a cause, and ultimately change how consumers behave.

## **2.2. Brand community**

The key concept that frames this research direction is the brand community. In this section, I describe how brand communities have been studied and what gaps in the knowledge about brand communities need to be filled. This knowledge about branding can be relevant before moving on to discuss brand communities as perceived by marketing professionals.

Building brand communities is part of the organisation's branding strategy. According to Doyle's (2016a) definition, a brand is:

A combination of attributes that gives a company, organisation product, service concept, or even an individual, a distinctive identity and value relative to its competitors, its advocates, its stakeholders, and its customers.

People's relationship with brands can be described as emotional as opposed to rational, Doyle (2016a) notes. To strengthen such a relationship, companies can start a brand fan

page on social media or a forum. The organisation's goal then is to "build and develop relationships with current and potential consumers by inducing dialogue and productive feedback around brand-related topics" (Magniant and Levy-Bélanchon, 2012, cited in Akrouit and Nagy, 2018). An organisation can achieve that goal "by contributing to the life of the virtual community and participating in its fulfilment," Akrouit and Nagy (2018) argue.

Forming and participating in brand communities has become an attractive and essential part of consuming products and interacting with brands for many people. When they feel the need to connect with others who have similar interests, online brand communities present an accessible opportunity to do so. Humphrey, Laverie, and Rinaldo (2015) list a few features of the brand community. First, the basis is usually a brand of a product or service that is consumed publicly, openly, or with some social interaction involved, rather than a brand consumed privately, by oneself, that inspires a community around it. Emotional involvement with the brand and other people interested in it, as well as a common goal that involves using the product or service are other important features. Eventually, members of such communities form rules and develop positive feelings such as enjoyment and attachment to the community and the brand behind it.

A wide amount of brand community studies have focused on the success stories and practical implications that would help companies build and manage engaged brand communities. Indeed, for businesses, having a brand community means being "fortunate" enough to be able to "gauge consumer sentiment, resolve potential customer issues, and advance new and existing relationships" easier, as Humphrey, Laverie, and Rinaldo (2015) put it. Engaged brand communities have become an established factor in sustaining trust in consumer-brand relationships, Habibi, Laroche and Richard (2014) say. This is why a lot of marketing literature is devoted to the analysis of the consumer-brand relationship and suggestions on how to build it. In Fournier, Breazeale, Fetscherin et al. (eds.) (2012), the relationship between the brand and the consumer is analysed primarily in the context of an interpersonal relationship: "The majority of brand relationship research involves the identification of relevant constructs in the personal relationships realm and their adaptation to the context of brands." Although, the fact that the relationship is not truly interpersonal



is acknowledged and the parasocial framework is used in their book as well. The findings are often presented in relation to brand loyalty (Marzocchi, Morandin and Bergami, 2013) or consumer trust (Casaló, Flavián and Guinalíu, 2007). Even brand community members' emotions, the benefits associated with participation in a brand community tend to be analyzed in relation to the businesses' perspective. Moreover, Cova and White (2010) call some brand communities "capable of developing potentially dangerous opposition and/or competitive offerings".

These are examples of intangible effects of brand communities on the performance of enterprises. At the same time, business literature attempts to measure the performance of brand communities, primarily engagement. For example, Zamith Brito and Zanette (2015) describe how marketers can set key performance indicators and use Facebook metrics and other tools to identify whether the goals are met.

Many brand community studies overlap with consumer studies. The concept that is closely related to customers seen as brand communities is consumer tribe. Marketing expert Seth Godin (2008) popularised the term in the professional circles. Godin describes tribes as groups of people who believe in the same idea and become connected over that idea and the sense of community. Marketers, Godin continues, have the power to lead the tribes. Online consumer tribes became a focus of some scholars, and Kozinets (2015) developed the netnographic methodology to study tribes. The essence of this approach is in listening and observing consumers online in order to grasp their genuine culture "instead of internalised assumption" and use the findings in advertising (Kozinets, 2006, p. 287) to match the needs and expectations of the consumers.

There are a few recent studies that shed light on the role of brand or company managers in co-creating value and identity together with brand communities. Essamri, McKechnie and Winklhofer (2019) explain that such an angle is worth adopting since brand identity is seen as constructed by different stakeholders, and the understanding of the role stakeholders from the management side play is still under-researched. Their study describes how brand managers nurture brand passion, create a brand family or social context, narrate and construct identities by the means of storytelling, bridge different brand identity meanings

so they create an overall synergetic image, and organise the partnering process between the community and the brand that results into sharing knowledge and creating materials. Moreover, in the study by deWinter, Kocurek and Vie (2017), interviewed community managers said it was crucial to listen to the community “but also to empathise, a move that is far more emotionally taxing.” Fournier, Sele and Schoegel (2005) cited in deWinter, Kocurek and Vie (2017) argue that

the tension between empathy and intimacy makes community management work difficult as managers must constantly find balance between becoming close to the community members they serve while at the same time maintaining their professional composure and their loyalties to the company with whom they are employed.

Grant, Heere and Dickson (2011) also use sports team managers as interviewees to find out how brand community markers in their industry compare to other, consumer-oriented industries. Their research design is aimed at exploring a specific environment in-depth assuming that some statements in the collected data are subjective which inspired the design of my study. Golant (2012) conducted a study that contributed to the knowledge about the ways of persuading brand managers to adopt brand values of their employer as their own. The justification for the need to have employees believe in the brand values is that it enables them to act in accordance with such values and thus convey the message of the brand to the public. Therefore, it is important to explore marketers’ perception of brand communities not just from the employer branding perspective but also from the possible effect on the community, itself.

To summarise this trend, many research papers on brand communities analyse the phenomenon from the brands’ or managerial perspective aiming to explain how the way businesses function has changed. Another popular focus of brand community studies is on how brand communities function on the inside, what it means to be a member of such a group. The methods of netnography / digital ethnography are commonly used in the second group of studies too. “Conducting ethnography is key to understanding both how and why people use social media and digital technologies,” and how online communities are

organised on the inside (McDonald, Nicolescu and Sinanan, 2017, p. 90). One angle that digital ethnographers use to study communities is what the activities of their members tell us about the particular formation. Each community has a different makeup of active and passive members. Solomon (2002, p. 324) developed a classification of the ways people can participate in virtual communities which is also applicable to online brand communities. In communities where consumption activity is highly self-centred, there are devotees—those whose social ties to the community are weak, or insiders—those whose social ties to the community are strong. In communities where there is low self-centrality of consumption activity, there are tourists—those whose social ties to the community are weak, and minglers—those whose ties to the community are strong. There is a rich selection of publications on the active behaviour in brand communities with the focus on a few key concepts. Engagement is a constant focus in brand community literature: how engagement can be spurred (Gutiérrez-Cillán, Camarero-Izquierdo and José-Cabezudo, 2017) or what impact engagement has, for example, on word-of-mouth (Loureiro, and Kaufmann, 2018), consumer behaviour (Alnsour and Al Faour, 2020) or, the other way around, how engagement is influenced by other factors such as consumer motivations (Napalkova, 2018).

The activity of brand communities is often examined in relation to value co-creation (Hartmann, Wiertz and Arnould, 2015; Benmiled-Cherif, Kaufmann, and Manarioti, 2016). By value co-creation, scholars mean the interactive process involving firms and consumers that implies dialogue, exchange of knowledge and skills as well as unique experiences (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; cited in Quach and Thaichon, 2017). A popular angle to look at brand communities is their contribution in detail, for example, contribution in the form of knowledge (Shen, Li and Sun, 2015), content (Teichmann, Stokburger-Sauer, Plank et al., 2015), shaping digital business models (Kucharska, 2019) and brand legitimacy (Hakala, Niemi and Kohtamäki, 2017). Activity in the form of word-of-mouth promotion is also a common theme in readings on brand communities. Electronic word-of-mouth behaviour manifests as giving, passing, and requesting opinions (Qiao, Song and Wang, 2019), and getting community members to engage in word-of-mouth activities is the desired outcome for companies (Seller, and

Laurindo, 2018). Word-of-mouth online results in promoting the brand and the product directly to new potential customers as well as boost the brand's reputation.

Previous studies have also investigated individuals' motivation to participate in regular communities and brand communities specifically. These motivations are social solidarity, value co-creation and symbolic consumption (Arnould and Thompson, 2007). Scholars continue to elaborate on what makes consumers participate in brand communities. From the psychological point of view, if consumers have strong emotions from an experience, they choose to endure this experience to avoid boredom, for example, see a movie (Andrade, 2015, p. 94). By extension, participating in a brand community gives consumers additional emotional experience. Additionally, some studies (Katz and Heere, 2015; Acar and Puntoni, 2016) focus on consumer empowerment through their participation in brand communities. Consumer empowerment means that brand community members are included into analysing and discussing products (Bansal and Bansal, 2018, cited in Mohammad, 2020) or in deciding what some aspects of the brand should be like (Cova and Pace, 2006, cited in Mohammad, 2020). A systematic review of literature about customer participation in online brand communities by Kamboj and Rahman (2017) has revealed that "a conceptual framework for member participation is undetermined" despite a high volume of studies. At the same time, studies on passive and lurking behaviour in brand communities exist (e.g. Kumar and Nayak, 2019) but, according to the assessment by Mousavi, Roper and Keeling (2017) which remains accurate, this group of community members "has been neglected to date and is poorly understood" in the publications.

In the literature, the process of community building tends to be presented as a controlled process with specific mechanisms that are used. For example, Brint (2001) writes that "tightly knit groups typically employ each of these mechanisms for strengthening group ties": mechanisms such as using ritual occasions, common meeting places, or designated times for interaction. Some scholars focus on the influence of brand communities on the concepts of value, ownership, consumption, and production. Consumers express their identity by choosing which brands to engage with and support, which social groups to associate themselves with (Black and Veloutsou, 2017). Users contribute their time and creative resources to the brands they support alongside company employees too. Cova et

al. (2011) cited in Black and Veloutsou (2017) argue that economic concepts of value, ownership, consumption, and production must be reevaluated based on how brand communities changed the field.

A brief literature review revealed how brand communities have previously been studied and what gaps in the knowledge on the subject still exist. In the following section, I review the concept of a brand community from a critical standpoint in the context of commercialisation and the consumer society.

### **2.3. Critical perspective on promotion and branding**

Modern society is often described as a consumer society, a phenomenon that inevitably brings up critical arguments in the literature. Consumer society's main characteristics are people obtaining products that can be consumed through exchange and that are not essential for survival but are valued for different reasons such as novelty, prestige or self-expression (Kiron, Ackerman and Goodwin, 1997). The effect of consumer society culture is criticised by environmentalists. Moreover, the distortion of the value of things, the rise of promotional culture and brand communities as part of it have provoked some critical responses which this section reviews.

One argument against promotional culture is based on the point that the term "community" loses its meaning as marketers use it constantly. First, in the marketing discourse, it has become common to call a group a community based on the fact that they consume the same product(s) and thus make that group sound equal to a subculture (de Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan, 2007). Second, many marketing practitioners commonly see the creation of the community of loyal customers as an act of gaining an army of Facebook or Twitter followers (Scott, 2016) and increasing website traffic. However, it is not always equal to building a community in the traditional sense. As a result, marketers are often accused of "spamming" and flooding people's news feeds with advertising as opposed to communicating something that brings people additional value. As Aronczyk and Powers (2010, pp. 10-11) rephrase Arvidsson's (2006) ideas,

Just as valuation techniques create economic value for the brand, so do the communicative exchanges consumers have about the brand — either face to face or via online networks. This is apparent not only on “brand fan” websites or at clubs for BMW aficionados but also on online platforms that are built specifically to use the social communication of consumers as sources of economic value.

The argument that the scholars make is that the term “community” is being misused in these instances, but it does not imply that the nature of the community has significantly changed.

For companies, it is common to strive for tangible results in marketing, and companies attempt to look at communities in terms of circulation, number of followers, likes, or views. As Aronczyk and Powers (2010, pp. 10-11) argue, when the brand’s value is determined in circulation, “a growing variety of circulating discourses can be mobilized in the service of the brand.” It may be different forms of media attention such as product reviews, news stories, or consumer-generated content. It may also be word-of-mouth or spreading rumours. At first glance, such information seems to be valuable to the brand followers, but “its economic value accrues primarily to the owners and other financial stakeholders [of the firm]” (Aronczyk and Powers 2010, pp. 10-11). The researchers lay emphasis on the fact that “the brand therefore remains a controlled and controlling device that limits social and political potential for participation” (Aronczyk and Powers 2010, pp. 11). It takes place even when the interaction happens on the platform that is not owned by the brand. Take Facebook—or any other social network, for example. In this case, it is already two parties taking advantage of the user data: the brand, and the platform provider. Given that the brand-user interaction normally takes place increasingly often on commercial platforms, such as social networks and other communication sites, the companies that control them can take advantage of the data that is left by the users and stored on the firm’s servers. The researchers that take a critical stance towards this case and promotional culture in general pose a few questions which are stated e.g. by Aronczyk and Powers (2010, p. 12):

In creating a spatial and temporal setting in which the brand can operate “risk-free,” we might ask what role we, as consumers, users, and citizens, are expected to occupy in this new setting. If our ability to communicate in a promotional culture is managed by contemporary systems of informational capitalism, are our public identities — the ones we share on Facebook and retail sites, the ones we use in our professional lives, the ones we put out to the world — now given over to the production of capital? Has the public subject become a promotional subject?

The answers to these questions are not too optimistic from the user’s perspective. The user agreements of the communication platforms like Google or Facebook usually allow the service provider to collect the data and use it in various ways, from promotional purposes, to selling it to third parties, with the user receiving nothing in return. The user data that used to be considered explicitly private before is now utilised for targeting advertising, showing it to the “right people” in the “right place” at the “right time”. This process has its merits from the business perspective, but also its demerits from the ethical perspective. For example, companies can use the client data for customising software that interacts with them again. It can be bots that communicate with customers providing customer support or sending out targeted emails. Such bots “have already been involved in ‘personality theft’” (Brown and Duguid, 2000, p. 58), even sending messages in the names of real people.

Besides, one more way that brands benefit from encouraging their fans to give feedback to the company about the product or service they are using. In theory, brands would use the feedback to alter their product or service to improve it. In practice, the way the feedback information is sometimes handles by the brands is not transparent to their customers and may result into poor privacy policy practices, as Aronczyk and Powers (2010, p. 20) argue referring to Turow (2006): “[c]onsumers may be only vaguely aware of their participation in this process and prohibited from learning what companies know about them or how the information is being put to use.” The scholars who tend to take a more critical stance towards technology affecting people’s everyday lives see it as an invasion into people’s private space. Moreover, in the debate about positive and negative qualities of promotional practices, another issue is usually brought up as an argument supporting the critical position. It is the concern over the lack of authenticity and the sincerity of the experiences

offered to people. According to this argument, people cannot solely be members of communities supporting their hobbies: as soon as they join the group, they become a target for promotional messages by brand representatives whose goal is to get the members of the group to buy more products. What amplifies this situation even more is that promotional practitioners are becoming the central actors of modern culture, as Aronczyk and Powers (2010, p. 16) state. According to their review of the papers supporting this argument,

Faced with this unhappy dilemma, some thinkers conceived of authenticity as a means to the end of promotionalism, a way to overcome the superficiality of the personality market and the pressures of publicity images. Others, however, offered a middle ground, one in which the performative character of authenticity... might yield a modicum of sincerity.

Commerce has played a more important role in recent decades, and audiences nowadays consider promotional culture more acceptable. For example, receiving promotional messages in places or contexts that used to be considered private, is now commonplace. Ahonen and Moore (2005, pp. 3-4) write that “in the Connected Age people will have public and private - and semi-private - personas, which coexist in the network and are connected independently.” These personas may be separated from different spheres, such as time spent at home or at work, or they may overlap. It is an illustration of how the public sphere intrudes into private life. The same logic goes for brand communities: participating in community activities such as spending time with friends used to be perceived as a purely interpersonal interaction zone, but the branding aspect turns brand community activities into promotional activities.

Concerns about the authenticity of promotional communication are linked to understanding the nature of companies and their agenda. The purpose of marketing today, according to Doyle (2016b), is “inspiring the entire organisation towards a market-centric, or customer-centric, frame of mind, approach,” thus helping consumers satisfy their demands. At the same time, institutional economic theory offers a different perspective on everything firms do, including marketing. Firms are organised in a way that makes it possible to overcome all the challenges that the market poses and, therefore, the firms’ nature is to



make a profit in the most efficient way possible (Coase, 1937). By extension, all marketing activities in general and development of brand communities, in particular, are the means to achieve the goal of making a profit, hence the critical perspective on promotional culture. For example, Martin (2015) describes the marketing process as follows: Millennials want to know more about their social group's experience, authentic opinions, the background information about the product they are interested in, and they are sceptical towards traditional marketing. "Credibility and relevancy are at the core of many Millennial buying decisions, and the ability for a brand to provide authenticity is critical in its strategic approach," Martin continues. In other words, for marketers, the process described by Martin is about finding ways (such as word-of-mouth or influencer marketing) to make Millennials (as well as customers from other generations) believe in the marketing messages. For consumers, engaging with brand communities implies engaging and developing a relationship with other like-minded consumers as well as the brand (Bowden et al., 2017). Such engagement can even manifest in improving consumers' wellbeing by reducing loneliness (Snyder and Newman, 2019). Conversely, scholars pose a question whether companies use tactics such as brand community engagement or "experiential marketing to manipulate consumers by encouraging them to deviate from rational decision making." (Malhotra, 2013). Additionally, as Powers and Pattwell (2015) state, brands are often portrayed as undying, and the words of this study's participants go in line with this perspective. However, Powers and Pattwell (2015) argue that brands do age and disappear from consumers' minds forever. For brand community members, it means that their social groups may disappear thus taking away from community members' identity. One question this study poses is whether company representatives reflect on the responsibility and consequences of brand community building and management.

The literature review shows that brand communities have been primarily studied in the context of marketing and anthropology in recent years. This review highlights the most frequently addressed research problems and the angles researchers choose when studying branded communities. Critically reviewing the community theories in relation to promotional culture helped situate this piece of research within the context of wider academic circles in the field of social sciences and identify the gap that has not been explored before.

Overall, there has been room for multi-disciplinary studies on the subject as noted by Porter (2006) which is still relevant. “Future research efforts require a focus on the uniqueness inherent in consumer-brand relationships and sensitivity to the marketing contexts in which they are engaged.” (Fournier, Breazeale, Fetscherin et al. (eds.), 2012) Currently there is a lack of literature on brand communities in the context of critical perspective on promotional culture and consumer society, and this study aims to fill that gap. Since the literature review shows that marketing professionals are often excluded from the picture in brand community literature. Marketing professionals are viewed primarily as the agents who are one with the companies in relation to brand communities. People directly responsible for community management are rarely viewed as a data source about brand communities or as a party with its own values, interests, and agenda. The following chapter describes the methods that are going to help answer the proposed research questions and fill in the gaps in the previous studies.

### **3. Methodology**

This chapter outlines the approach and methods that helped to address the defined research questions in the most appropriate manner. It also describes the data collection details, data analysis plan and the ethical considerations.

#### **3.1. Research design**

The research design of choice is exploratory. Exploratory research focuses on finding new viewpoints to a phenomenon, to ask questions and thus, to evaluate the phenomenon from a new viewpoint. As the literature review has shown, the viewpoint of marketing professionals on brand communities has not been explored sufficiently which makes the exploratory research design suitable for this study. Stebbins (2001) explains that exploration is appropriate when researchers have little knowledge about the studied phenomena and presume “it contains elements worth discovering”. Therefore, according to Stebbins (2001), to explore the subject effectively, the researcher should be flexible in sourcing the data and aim to produce inductively derived generalisations about the subject that can be turned into a grounded theory.

This design was appropriate as it allowed us to find new perspectives that were not obvious before, as explained by Stappers, Sleeswijk and Keller (2014). Normally, the questions researchers ask in this type of study is “What is happening here, specifically? What do these happenings mean to the people engaged in them?” (Mabry, 2008, p. 218). As cited in Mabry’s social research handbook, Erickson (1986, p. 124) states that a qualitative case study usually addresses a “need for specific understanding through documentation of concrete details”. Thus, this is an empirical study of community building practices in Finnish corporations that uses in-depth qualitative data and aims to record people’s views on an issue and give them a voice. The most appropriate methods, according to Mabry (2008, p. 218) are qualitative methods, particularly, interview. I describe the method I chose in more detail in the following sections.

The conducted study is in line with the social constructivist approach. A social constructivist, or interpretivist, approach to a qualitative study stems from the assumption that the realities we study are social products of the actors, of interactions and institutions, and social constructivist approach in particular focuses on social conventions and people's perceptions from that angle. According to Burkitt (1999) cited in Patel (2012), "reality is not a constant, but an ever-changing realm that is both discursively and practically constructed by people". A constructivist approach, Collin (1997) explains,

allows us to discuss to what extent the social realm is generated by the consensus of social agents, whether communities using radically different conceptual structures live in different social worlds, or to what extent the social sphere is a product of human convention, without being distracted by irrelevant issues.

Flick (2013, p. 205) calls constructivism something that is related to narrative-based approach rather than a cognitive approach, which directs the researcher to pay attention to "what happened" in the analysed text. The study of how marketing professionals perceive brand communities is in line with social constructivism since the aim was to investigate what image of brand communities is created by the people who work with them, not establish the "true" nature of those communities.

Stemming from the research design and the general aim of the research, the strategy chosen for conducting this research is qualitative. As Packer (2011) writes, qualitative research is closely tied with the notion of the social construction of realities by the means of communication; qualitative research is often referred to as "the objective study of subjectivity". Qualitative research also pays attention to the perspectives of participants, in everyday practices and everyday knowledge referring to the issue under study. The goal of the research demanded to see what kind of an image fan communities have in the eyes of the participating marketing professionals. By using qualitative research strategy, it was possible to examine the true viewpoints and experiences that the participating professionals have with their work responsibilities.

### 3.2. Data collection

The following sections describe the data this study is based on, justify this choice, and explain how I approached this data with research methods. It explains the motivation behind gathering particular types of data, my approach towards collecting it and the obstacles faced throughout the process.

I researched the phenomenon by conducting and analysing the interviews of people who participate in the brand's community strategy execution. Interviews, notably the qualitative ones, "allow for understanding and meanings to be explored in depth" (Arksey and Knight, 1999, p. 32). Qualitative interviews are a common way of collecting data in social sciences in general (Packer, 2011). I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews. The questions in the interview guide (see Appendix 1. Sample Questionnaire Form) were influenced both by the theoretical framework and the goal of answering the research questions to fill in the gap in the knowledge about brand communities. Most questions encouraged the interviewees to describe different aspects of brand communities, giving them space to develop the arguments they consider important. The questions targeted interviewees' views on the relationships between community members themselves, brand community and the company and, finally, interviewees' attitude towards brand communities. An example of the question on the first topic is "What, do you think, makes this brand community a real community and not a random group of people?" (question no. 4 in the interview guide). To find out how participants interpret the community-company relationship, questions like no. 5 "What is the company's strategy/position towards building or supporting the community?"<sup>1</sup> were posed. To grasp interviewees' attitudes toward the concept of being a member of any brand community that is relevant to their interests and a community that interviewees work with in particular, I asked questions like no. 10 "Would you say that you are a member of this community or any other brand community?"<sup>2</sup> Additional questions were raised in each interview depending on the answers. For example, when it was beneficial to clarify some statements or when a participant digressed to a new topic, there would be additional questions to maintain the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Appendix 1

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Appendix 1

structure of the interview. The interview questions were phrased so that they would be clear to the participants by such tactics as avoiding ambiguous terms. In each interview, participants were asked different types of questions, from introductory to specifying, the majority being open-ended. When the interview guide was drafted, the questions were pre-tested on a person with a similar background but not included in the sample. The testing helped to see whether the questions were understandable and showed which ones needed to be modified, minor changes were made after the pilot.

The flexibility of interviews was an important part of the research design. Semi-structured interviews have certain benefits important for this type of research topic. The flexibility of question order and content helped to reveal different dimensions of the studied phenomena. For example, such interviews “allow probative follow-up questions and exploration of topics unanticipated by the interviewer, facilitate the development of subtle understanding of what happens in the case and why,” Mabry (2008, p. 218) writes. Having semi-structured interviews also helps achieve the goal of the creation of the discussion platform on the studied topic as these kinds of interviews, essentially, allow the discussion to develop. The semi-structured format allows the researcher to prepare a list of questions in advance, but be able to change their order, the wording, add follow-up questions and “allow much more space for interviewees to answer on their own terms” (Edwards and Holland, 2013, p. 29) without leading them to certain answers. In the case of my research, the flexible component was important because it was impossible to know in advance how the conversation with each participant would go and what questions should be omitted or discussed more in each case.

Another important benefit of semi-flexible interviewing is the opportunity “to notice opportunities and to follow data wherever they lead” (Mabry, 2008, p. 218) rather than searching for evidence to confirm or disprove a pre-existing hypothesis. This feature helped minimise the chance of the research being biased and increased the precision of analysis. Finally, for the purpose of shedding light on the researched phenomenon, it is important is that meanings are created in the interaction between the researcher and the participant, “which is effectively a co-production, involving the construction or reconstruction of knowledge,” as Edwards and Holland (2013, p. 3) rephrase the ideas of

Mason (2002, p. 62). At the same time, having the same fixed set of questions in each interview helped maintain more or less the same structure in all conversations and, thus, made data analysis easier. Additionally, the fixed structure of the interview guide ensured that all necessary topics and sub-themes were covered in an interview.

Regarding other features of the interview guide, I chose the topic-centred format. The topic was derived directly from the thesis title which is the view of developing branded online communities. The topics in the interview guide are also shaped by the research questions that target what the respondents think of brand communities as part of their work. The result of such a research strategy, facilitated the revelation of the thoughts of the interviewees regarding building branded communities.

In order to evaluate the phenomenon of branded community building in a new light, I selected the participants due to their capacity to give insights on the topic. The sample chosen for this research was six representatives of four Finnish corporations. The respondents are the people who, at the time when the interview took place, were or used to be employed in the marketing or sales departments at the management level. The participants were both male and female, they came from different age groups between 20-60 years. The interviewees were both of Finnish origin and from other countries, all were employed in Finland. The age of the participants was not a dominant factor when selecting them, although it was preferable that the candidate already had some working experience with planning marketing activities on a strategic level and overseeing the work of their team or multiple departments that contribute to community management. These people work either with digital marketing and community strategy directly or with the overall marketing strategy. Most companies the respondents work(ed) for are some of the best-known companies based in Finland with a strong offline (when applicable) and online presence in at least three countries besides the country of origin. The companies represent different industries, such as IT, telecommunications and retail, software and hardware, business-to-business, and business-to-consumer. All meetings took place face to face, each interview lasted for about an hour, and their audio recordings were produced alongside with some written notes during the conversations. Afterwards, the recordings were transcribed to facilitate the analysis.

The technique utilised for selecting research participants was a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling is one kind of non-probability sampling which dictates that the participants or data are picked in accordance with the research questions (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2018, p. 389). As the purpose is to understand how marketing professionals see branded community building, the participants were chosen so that they would make it possible to answer the posed research questions, as well as their relevance to the phenomenon. After determining the purpose and starting contacting potential participants, I asked them for referrals to other relevant people they knew which helped gather more data with the snowball sampling method.

These data gathering techniques helped to ensure that the participants were able to provide materials relevant to the posed research questions yet be semi-flexible in the topics they bring up and not be led to certain answers. Next, I expand on the obstacles I faced when collecting the data and explain how I handled them so that the research is reliable and cohesive.

The main issue I faced was that potential interviewees turned out to be difficult to reach. That issue was resolved by taking sufficient time to gather six interviews and to make them long enough to get a substantial amount of data to work with in order to get more material for qualitative analysis. The other issue I faced was that sometimes it felt challenging to get interviewees to express their opinions and thoughts on the subject openly. Occasionally, instead of answering some questions directly, a participant would start talking about something else that interests them or what they consider a safer topic. The reason was never explained by the participants, but this is typically caused by the lack of trust they might feel towards the researcher. The hesitation to talk about some things could also be caused by one's fear that it might affect their job. When I felt that the participant was avoiding answering a particular question, I would try to ask a follow-up question and then accept their unwillingness to talk about that subject and move on to other subtopics. Additionally, the gaps in the topics that the participants covered were considered in the analysis as this contributes to how they perceive brand communities. In the following sections, I outline the research design, justify the choice of certain methods above the others and explain how I proceed with the data analysis.



### **3.3. Thematic analysis**

To process the obtained set of interviews and answer the research questions, I turned to thematic text analysis. This type of qualitative analysis aims to identify and describe both implicit and explicit ideas, or themes, within the data (Guest, 2012, p. 10). The reason why this particular method of data analysis was selected is that as Guest (2012, p. 11) argues, thematic analysis is the most useful method for catching the complexities of meaning in the texts. This method suited the goal of shedding light on the thoughts of marketing professionals on building branded communities.

I used the grounded theory approach to the applied thematic analysis. Guest (2012, pp. 12-13) explains that the goal of such an approach is to drive the interpretations directly from the data at hand. The process of the analysis under this approach is the following. First, according to Guest (2012, p. 12) who cites Bernard and Ryan (1998), one reads the texts, then identifies possible themes that occur in the texts, after which, compare the themes and build structural links between them. The final step, being building theoretical models derived from the data, can be included partially in the grounded theory-guided research, and in applied analysis, a theoretical model may or may not become the result of the study.

I followed the multi-stage categorising and coding process of thematic analysis described by Kuckartz (2014). Step 1 — carefully reading all transcripts, highlighting important parts, taking notes. Step 2 — defining main topical categories. Step 3 — the data is coded using the main categories. Step 4 — the quotations are grouped together according to the main category they belong to. Step 5 — defining sub-categories. Step 6 — the coding of data is updated according to the whole category system. Step 7 — analysing categories, presenting the results.

In practice, the analysis was performed as follows. First, I carefully read the transcripts, highlighted meaningful and relevant to the topic passages with the help of the Atlas.ti software. Then, I collected all highlighted quotations and started separating them according to the theme. Some of the themes discovered at this stage ended up forming second-order

themes (see Figure 1 below), other topics formed their sub-categories. Besides, at this stage, it became possible to see how significant some themes were judging by the number of quotations related to them. Some of the first-order concepts are interviewees' feelings about working with brand communities and benefits for brands or community members. After forming second-order themes, aggregate dimensions appeared based on what would summarise and describe each theme. After the coding frame (see Appendix 2. Coding frame) was complete, the analysis and the presentation of results were conducted.

In this thematic analysis, first-order concepts, second order themes, and aggregate dimensions were defined based on what the data showed. The first order concepts also refer to three main actors in the discussed situations, namely, the participants, the companies and the communities and their members. All concepts and themes are closely related to each other and the research questions, as they show what kinds of themes come up when the participants described brand communities, which themes are more prevalent and how each theme can be summarised.

<b>First-order concepts</b>	<b>Second-order themes</b>	<b>Aggregate dimensions</b>
Interviewees' feelings about being a member of communities	<b>Participants feel distant from all brand communities</b>	<i>Marketing professionals as individual intermediaries between communities and brands</i>
Interviewees' feelings about working with brand communities		
Benefits for the brands	<b>Symbiotic relationship between brand communities and companies</b>	<i>The relationship between companies and communities is desired, mutually beneficial</i>
Interaction between communities and brands		
Creation of communities		
Conflicts		
Community structure	<b>Incomplete and blurry profile of brand communities</b>	<i>Active life within brand communities as seen by the interviewees</i>
Benefits for community members		
Community activities		

Metaphors and comparisons describing communities		
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**Figure 1.** Data Structure

### 3.4. Validity and trustworthiness

In this section, I outline the biggest issues in the research validity and ethics that I faced while planning and conducting the study. Making a research piece valid and trustworthy is the goal of every researcher. At the same time, complete validity cannot ever be reached, for example, because a participant may change their behaviour because they are aware of the fact that they are being researched. However, a researcher can aim to come as close to full research validity as possible and consider the limitations. Below I describe how I tackled this issue.

First, in order to make the study valid and trustworthy, I enclosed analysis materials and steps so that it would be possible to follow them and reuse them in another study to check what results can be achieved. The steps of gathering, analysing, and interpreting the data are described in the study for this purpose.

Second, I took certain steps when gathering the data. Before conducting an interview, I asked for the participant's informed consent<sup>3</sup> to record the interviews and participate in this research, explaining its goal. The participants were informed of the topic of the interview, the reason they were selected, and they were given an opportunity to correct their words or withdraw their participation at any time. For example, I explained that the interviews would be recorded, but only the interviewer had access to the recordings and transcripts. Also, the interviewees were told that the transcripts could be sent to them for inspection in case errors or misinterpretation had happened, or if they wanted to add or clarify something. It was also mentioned that the interview data is to be stored for one year after the publication of this thesis work and destroyed after that.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Appendix 3. Interview consent form

Other difficulties and inaccuracies, according to Mabry (2008, p. 220), could occur when interviews are conducted in a language which is not the mother tongue of the researcher and the respondents<sup>4</sup>. To avoid the risk of such inaccuracies, I asked additional questions if anything was unclear during the interviews, and carefully read the transcripts when analysing the data to make sure I followed the logic behind the arguments and so on. Thus, the risk of inaccurate presentation of the data was minimised.

When I analysed the transcripts, I anonymised the names of the interviewees, their gender and the names of the companies they work or worked for in order to avoid causing potential harm to the participants that may affect their career, for example. In the following chapters, the text mentions Participant A, B, C, D, E and F, and the only pronoun used in regard to them is the gender-neutral *they*. What is reported in the Analysis chapter is a generic mention of the industry that the participants work(ed) in and the names of their job positions. It is crucial to write the report correctly and not harm the interviewees and the organisations they represent.

When it comes to analysing and interpreting the results, the lack of objectivity is one of the biggest possible struggles social scientists deal with. As Mabry (2008, p. 221) points out, “validity in interpretivist social science is complicated by subjectivity, so pervasive in interpretivist practice that some claim the researcher is the method.” Research process is complicated by the interpretivist acknowledgment that social phenomena are perceived differently by different participants and researchers, preempting confirmation of the replication of studies. In order to make the study as objective as possible, I closely followed the steps of an established method of qualitative research and data gathering. For example, I chose to do semi-structured interviewing because it helps avoid relying on the hypothesis too much and allows the researcher to discover something expected or unexpected in the data. This method allows participants to have a flexible conversation that can take any form and rely on the prepared list of questions or topics to touch upon as a guideline, but not as an obligation. This measure is a set towards greater reliability of this research.

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<sup>4</sup> English, in this case

## **4. Analysis**

In the obtained data set, three major themes were revealed, each one reflecting how participants see brand communities from different angles. The analysis is built around the following themes: participants feel distant from all brand communities, symbiotic relationship between brand communities and companies and incomplete and blurry profile of brand communities. The chapter contains the summaries of the interviews followed by the presentation of the thematic analysis results divided into sections around first-order concepts.

### **4.1. Case summaries**

To begin the presentation of the findings, I provide brief case summaries. They include a description of how the interviewees described their involvement in community management at their current or former employer, the topics covered in each conversation and opinions expressed.

Participant A comes from Finland and represents the retail industry. The participant occupied the position of the Head of Brand Marketing and concepts and was the also head of an in-house marketing agency, they were not working with the community directly. The participant was employed at the company for 7 years and was already not employed there when the interview took place. We talked about the company's customers, target audience and community composition, branding strategy, and the activities of the audience that characterise it as a community. The participant also touched on the tactics aimed at growing sales such as customer loyalty programs, external factors affecting customers' behaviour and loyalty and how that is connected to community development. We discussed possible reasons behind people's desire to connect to this brand and to each other to engage in some activities facilitated by the company. The interviewee also spoke about their personal attitude to their former employer's brand as a worker and a consumer.

Participant B comes from Finland and represents the retail industry. They are the Head of Customer & Loyalty at the discussed company and do not interact with customers directly.

At the time of the interview, they have been employed at the company for two years. We talked about customers' relationship with the brand and their attitude towards it, their needs and interests, and the number of informal groupings of people that the Participant considers real communities. The Participant described the activities that the shoppers and the community engage in offline and online and shared their stance on the brand itself as an employee, as a consumer and as a professional who develops services for the customers.

Participant C is originally from Italy and worked in the gaming and education industries. Prior to the day when the interview took place, they worked as Customer Engagement Manager for 6 months and Customer Support Lead for almost 4 years at two separate companies that we discussed. Their responsibilities included some interaction with the communities but predominantly included other types of tasks. During the interview, we discussed the established brand communities that the discussed companies had, their structure and activities. A significant part of the discussion was devoted to the topic of how people or companies are able to form communities in the first place. The participant spoke about their experience of interacting with different communities as an employee and private individual, and expressed their opinion on what the relationship between brands and communities should be like and what companies should specifically do.

Participant D comes from Finland and represents a telecommunications company where they were employed at the time of the interview, occupying the Head of Corporate Social Media position. They can interact with some community members, but their job description is not focused solely on that. The participant has been with the company for 20 years. With Participant D, we talked about different communities about the brand and the interests, activities and needs of each one of them. Then, the interviewee answered the questions on their opinion regarding community-building strategy that a company should have. We also discussed the interviewee's interaction and involvement in different communities around the company they work for.

Participant E is also from Finland. At the time of the interview, they had the role of a Marketing Director at a gaming company where they have been for over 4 years. The participant previously was the Global senior manager at a telecommunications company

for 5 years, and we talked about the state of the brand community there as well. Both positions were at a high level of management, therefore the Participant did not interact with brand communities directly often. Participant E spoke about community development from a company's marketing strategy perspective and gave their opinion on how fan-brand interaction can develop depending on what kind of product and brand there is. Then, we discussed the relationship between the above-mentioned telecommunications company and its fans. They also spoke about how community management is organised at the gaming company they work for. The participants also shared their values when it comes to being part of a brand community themselves.

Participant F comes from Colombia and works in the gaming industry. When the interview took place, they worked as a Social media and community manager and had been with the company for 2 years. The role includes but is not limited to frequent interactions with the fan community. With Participant F, we talked about various activities in the brand community they work with and the factors that unite people there. The interviewee spoke about communities forming almost by themselves and companies facilitating the process but not overpowering it as the optimal strategy.

#### **4.2. Interviewees' feelings about communities**

I begin the presentation of the findings with the "Participants feel distant from all brand communities" category analysis. One research question of this study concerns marketing professionals' view of brand communities. Therefore, starting with analysing statements on their personal experiences and feelings helps understand the prism through which participants see brand communities. The theme that was derived from conversations on this topic can be described as participants seeing any brand communities as something that is unrelated to their current needs or lifestyle. The first order concepts forming this theme lead to the aggregate dimension that helps us see marketing professionals as individual intermediaries between communities and brands.

#### **4.2.1. Interviewees as community members**

All participants worked in the positions above junior level and did not spend most of their working hours interacting with designated brand communities, yet they all had some personal experiences and feelings regarding them. One of the interview goals was to find out whether the interviewees considered themselves to be part of the fan communities of the companies they worked for. The justification of that question is the following: some may choose a position related to their hobbies or personal interests since they already understand it well, and it was interesting to find out whether the participants of this study had a personal interest in participating in brand communities. The data showed what kind of attitude marketers who participated in this study had towards being members of communities.

The participants mostly felt somewhat distant from the communities they had to deal with at work. For some participants, the reason was that they were not engaged enough with the product(s) of their company, e.g. they did not play a mobile game for leisure at the time. Participant E explained that they would not engage with any community because they view this activity primarily as a means to get some information which can also be obtained elsewhere:

Personally, I don't like, I don't feel the need to have big engagement and have the time to engage with a community. My questions, my answers, so I get any kind of question that pretty much I have answers for online.

However, most participants did not feel completely indifferent to fan communities around their companies. Four of them admitted having used the service or the product of their companies in the past and being very engaged in the fan communities then. For two participants, that period was during their now-expired employment at the discussed company; for another two, it was before and at the beginning of their work. For Participant F, their personal involvement in the community subsided as it became a job to interact with it. For Participant A, it was the external factor that changed her fandom, namely changes in the national economic situation which caused many consumers including the interviewee



to alter their shopping behaviour. In addition, the participants needed mainly to “lurk” in the communities, as interviewee C states, to “spectate there for learning purposes” (interviewee E’s words).

When one belongs to a community, it is, in theory, easier for them to understand other members, their needs and wishes. For community “outsiders” like the participants of this study, therefore, it may be challenging to feel what the community desires, and that was one of the questions in each interview. In general, the participants who did not consider themselves members of discussed brand communities did not go into details on this matter, and what they said contradicted the assumption stated above. Received responses implied that by “lurking”, carefully monitoring online discussions, marketers can understand how to cater to a particular community. Participant B claimed that for them it is not necessary to be a brand fan to do their job well. They talked about a hypothetical service that, in their opinion, would be anticipated and beneficial for the community around their company. Participant B then added: “I don’t need it, myself but I see definitely a valuable service for us. I don’t have to be designing the program for myself.” Participant E’s response on the same topic was simple: “I don’t have any challenges interacting with the community because I am not an active member in that community.” The last response confirmed that my initial hypothesis regarding this theme was disproved. Participants appeared to not be close enough to the communities they work with to be considered regular members. Current needs of the members of those communities are somewhat foreign to the participants.

#### **4.2.2. Subjects’ priorities and values**

Often, one takes a job that somehow relates to their personal interests, for example, a person who enjoys playing games works in a game developing company or someone who likes fashion takes a position in a retail company. Moreover, one can be a fan of a product or brand, for example, a mobile game, and later find themselves working for the company behind that. Therefore, it was interesting to find out whether participants of this study had some passions related to their work or industry and whether it influences them being also part of the brand community around their companies. From the questions on this topic,

another theme emerged in a few interviews. It was the potential conflict between talking to community members as company representatives vs. private individuals.

Participant C felt that being a company employee, they must not be too active in the brand community. One reason was them thinking that the community platform was for the fans interacting with each other. Another reason was the participant trying to avoid attracting too much attention to themselves, for example, so that they would not have to answer a lot of questions on behalf of the whole company:

I've never been an active part of a community because I don't know, I felt like I didn't want people to find out that I was working for the company and start asking a lot of questions and so I didn't want to do that.

The idea of one's professional identity penetrating everyday life and influencing their online personality was rejected by participant E too. They spoke about situations when companies make employees post something about their projects in their personal social media accounts and expressed a negative opinion on that: "I would feel strange about a company enforcing that you must promote your own company that the company would prescribe that you must do that." At the same time, participant E's attitude towards one's genuine desire to share something work-related with friends in social media, so long as it comes from the individual:

I would wish that you would work in a company and be in the presence of like-minded people who are proud and would want to share the materials and the things that you work on but not to an excessive degree, so like with a good taste in a way that like if you do something really great and you are happy with it or you want to complement your friends or your colleagues.

The quotes related to the theme of interviewees not belonging to discussed communities overall have shown that the participants insisted on separating their personality, their private life, and interests from their work responsibilities. Moreover, participants' consumption of products and services appeared to not be impacted by brand communities

either. This is one of the features defining the framework that the participants see brand communities through.

The theme I analyse further stems partly from participants' words and partly from my interpretation of their quotes on other topics described above. This theme is the values that are important to the interviewees when it comes to brands and companies as service-providers, employers, and agents in society. This theme is crucial because values guide many aspects of one's life including their professional activity. For the participants of this study, professional activity is related to brand communities and therefore may influence the people in them.

All participants said something that directly or indirectly implied that there are certain values that are important to them. The most often mentioned values had something to do with freedom, for instance, freedom of self-expression. Freedom of self-expression can be applied to using one's personal social media accounts for compulsory promotion of their employer or using the accounts however one wishes. This aspect of freedom was brought up by Participant E.

From how the participants spoke about their interaction with brand communities, it sounded like they were also able to choose a strategy themselves and behave accordingly. From the quotes shown above, I concluded that the interviewees appreciate that they do not have to fake their interest in the community and remain passive on its platform. This is another example of how the appreciation of the freedom of self-expression is reflected in the obtained interviews.

A value that is closely related to self-expression is genuineness. When the participants spoke about genuineness, they brought it up in the context of being genuine themselves or companies being genuine and honest with their fans or customers. Both aspects are important to the interviewees.

When they spoke about their choice of a passive role in the brand communities, one implication of such a role is that the participants are not forced to fake enthusiasm about

the product or brand that they do not have, pretending to be a fan when they are not. This is one side of being genuine in the participants' position. Here are the words of participant E that illustrate how this theme was developed:

You can be proud of the work you do and broadcast it on Twitter or something like that without saying explicitly that this is our work or my work but you can go into a forum and pretend to be another fan and say that this is fantastic.

Another example came from Participant D who spoke about their personal social media accounts. They emphasized the fact that they present themselves as a company employee, for example, on Twitter, but it does not overpower their image and oust all other personality traits the participant has:

Because I'm genuine, I am what I am. So, one thing where our brand channels are doing, that's the official company brand engagement that's taking place. But then, it's me, and I when I am myself in social media so I am very clearly a company representative but I am also somebody who is interested in other things, and I see it very clearly what are the things I am interested in and what I am showing emotions which I quite often do. It's genuine and I think that's also the thing for brands to be genuine in social media.

Participant D mentioned that they value when brands are genuine too, and other participants supported this topic when they spoke about companies' relationship with customers. Overall, the participants put a lot of emphasis on the importance of being genuine in the online environment, whether they are being active on a community platform or elsewhere, even if being genuine meant remaining passive.

Some participants also spoke about the things they personally value in companies they buy from or work for. These statements can be divided into two groups: values oriented towards an individual and society. When it comes to the things interviewees value in the companies that they have consumer-provider relationships with, they named customer appreciation, attention to them, making customers' lives easier, and creating comfort for

them as well as rewarding loyal customers. These are the values from the individualism realm, the ones that make participants' lives better in one way or another.

Another group of statements reflects the values oriented towards the common good, the society as opposed to the individual. One of these values is social responsibility. It was brought up by Participant E who said that they want to work in companies that have high social responsibility standards: "I tend to be a fan of companies that reinvent kind of technological things and have a good set of values." Two participants spoke about their willingness to do something for the company they work for or for other employees (on top of their responsibilities):

I am actually a fan of the company; I just would not be. I am not that type of a person who would be part of any community, but I don't think that means that I am not a fan of the company. Actually, I joined it because I want this company to be here forever. I could go elsewhere, it would be easier for me to go elsewhere. But I want to work in this company because I want to see this company to change, be again where it should be.

Another example from the same realm spoke about the global community of employees of their company who use a certain hashtag on social media and thus connect with each other. The participant said they play the role of employee advocate on social media which implies promoting a positive image of the company to the people who would potentially enjoy working there or speaking for the existing employees. These kinds of dialogues indicate that selflessness and altruism are important for some interviewees in certain life aspects related to various communal behaviour.

Participants also mentioned transparency in the context of it being one of the cornerstones of building modern fan communities. Transparency is another value that is crucial in the context of society or the common good. The participants acknowledged the importance of transparency in relation to the communal aspect but did not express a strong attitude towards it. When speaking of transparency and social responsibility, the conversation

remained on the abstract level, while the parts of the dialogues about the values in the participants' own lives were more concrete and included specific examples.

Many brands create a list of their values, and we touched on this subject with Participant A. They argued that company values must mean something in practice:

I do not think that the values are important on their own. They should be reflected in the service; you have to be true to the values and come up with it in real life. At the same time, the values should differentiate the company somehow as many have very generic values. I might be a bit rebellious when I say this, but are values the thing today? Maybe defining customer experience is more important?

To sum it up, it is reflected in the obtained interviews that participants consider it important that companies they work for and whose products they consume have some kind of values. It is also important for the participants that the values are embedded in the way companies function. None of the participants said it directly, but it is possible to argue that the participants try to match their professional and consumer behaviour to their values which is likely to include managing brand communities and participating in brand communities themselves.

#### **4.3. Communities and brands**

The next second-order theme that emerged in the discussions with participants was the symbiotic relationship between brand communities and companies. This theme is connected to the topic of the relationship between communities and brands. Overall, participants described relationships between companies and brand communities in a positive light, they talked mostly about success stories they had witnessed or the tactics their colleagues can use to establish a relationship with the community that is beneficial for both sides. The first order concepts forming this theme lead to the aggregate dimension "The relationship between companies and communities is desired, mutually beneficial". The analysis of this second-order theme helps to answer the research question concerning

marketing professionals' perception of brand communities as well as the brand-community relationship.

#### **4.3.1. Creation of communities**

During the interviews, no direct questions inquiring how brand communities form, yet this topic became apparent in the data. Participants described the process of how brand communities appear, and according to them, communities are either created by companies or emerge by themselves.

In some interviews, a participant would refer to both concepts, communities forming by themselves or with external help, throughout the conversation. The participants were not necessarily speaking about the same, one particular community throughout the whole conversation. Therefore, participants were either demonstrating that they have a vague idea of how some communities formed or talking about the variety of scenarios. For example, here are the quotes from Participant E's interview with mentions of either community forming scenario:

People start to form their own communities around your stuff that's what we/you aim for and you can help them out in ways but your role is not to influence, to manage or to enforce the discussion.

And:

The social mechanics of games have also made communities more important and that's what we notice also that okay if there is a social element to your game then that is one of the key ingredients to creating a functioning community.

Within this sub-theme, the participants also talked about the external conditions that are necessary for allowing a fan community to form and flourish. Participants said the brand should cause strong affection or offer something unique besides the product the company sells, for example, an empowering or tribal feeling, a way to solve everyday problems, a

new way to express oneself: “The communities should be started some other way than deciding that it’s something we sell. It would need to offer something to customers.” Brand representatives who interact with the community need to appear trustworthy by making it clear that they are there on behalf of the company and their goal is to facilitate the community activities: “One of the key elements of community building and participation is transparency so people know what you represent and what point of you are coming to.”

These factors are partly under the company’s control. But these factors also are created unintentionally, unpredictably. This idea was conveyed by the participants who spoke of communities as of something that just happens:

You provide the tools, you provide the space, but, um, you can’t really decide, like, we have a new line of scissors, and there will be a community around it. Well, maybe there will, maybe there won’t. You provide the tools; the crowd takes care of the rest.

In the interviews, the cases when brands did successfully launch a fan community, the following scenario was described. The company provided a platform for the community where people could interact in a new way — a Facebook group, a separate forum, online and offline events like meetups. However, interviewees showed that it was clear for them that community creation and development is not controlled by companies. Moreover, participants clearly voiced their opinion that a hypothetical situation when a company attempts to force the community do something is likely to end badly:

It is unclear how my team could turn the customers into a community around this brand. There should be something that makes these people want to be part of this community.

It is worth noting that participants did not go into details about cases when the community-brand relationship was significantly undermined, or a brand community died off or posed a threat to the company’s business. Thus, participants conveyed an image of brand communities existing in symbiosis with the companies behind the brands.



#### **4.3.2. Interaction between the brands and the fans**

The next theme that emerged in the conversations was the positivity and intensity of the engagement between the brands and the fans. Engagement was overall one of the most popular words used by all participants. Engagement was brought up in different contexts. One context was regarding the followers engaging with the content that the brand puts out. This kind of engagement usually takes place on the community platform and the brand's official channels, for example, social media pages: "Look at the Facebook page, for example, you can see that every post they put out, there is quite a lot of interaction." This kind of interaction is what professional marketers measure as an indication of the success of their tactics. When this theme came up, participants would start speaking almost as if they were speaking to their colleagues, bringing up tangible results, occupation-specific concepts such as user-generated content, or that a brand needs to have a strategy and guidelines for communicating with community members:

First of all, you need to have a good strategy and good guidelines. So that you know in advance that you set the rules of the game. Okay, these types of comments which are rude, those you turn off. But then you don't delete negative comments. Whatever your principles are and stick to those and you write them down, that you have a kind of guidebook/playbook that you go by, and then the bigger it becomes, the better monitoring systems you need to have and do it very analytically and do it documented way and you just need more people on board to do that. So, you need tooling and good people with head on their shoulders so you can know when to step in and when not.

These parts of the conversation, in particular, the language that was used, felt like the participants stopped expressing their opinions on brand communities and started explaining how they execute the brand's marketing strategy. In those moments, participants were speaking from the company's observing and analytical perspective, not a personal standpoint.

In relation to the engagement of fans with the brand, another prominent theme surfaced. All participants touched on how proactive brands are, should or should not be when trying to get the community members engaged. In other words, the theme that emerged from the interviews was companies acting in an active or passive capacity. The participants talked about brand behaviour aimed at developing a dialogue with the audience or listening to them. One case of developing a dialogue from the company's side was described by a participant from the retail industry:

We used to have the program which could have developed customers into a community, it was called The Customer Experts. We launched a closed Facebook group, and there was a huge movement around it. One of our B2B sales consultants shared it on the internet, and a Saving... [Company Name] movement started. At some point, the number of people who applied to join the group was so high that the creator stopped accepting them. This movement lasted for a few months.

According to the participant, the group was autonomous. The company employees were posting something in the group occasionally and talking to the group members there. Once the company's marketing team asked the group members to ask a questionnaire and got 30,000 answers for one week. The Participant described the established interaction as an open, mentored dialogue: "We learned a lot, the customers got a chance to interact with the brand, the top management realised that it was true that the customer owns the brand, not us."

Another approach to interacting with the brand community, the listening strategy was described by another participant as it follows:

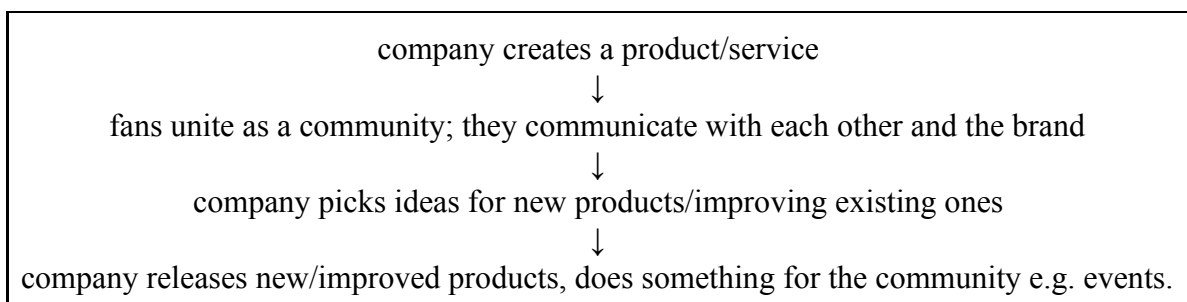
I think the role of marketing is to facilitate these communities to happen and definitely not drive them in any way that a marketer might think of so they should be left as spontaneous as they can be and generally speaking the marketing should try to see how it can kind of use the community to for example to get feedback or to add newcomers when they have any problem to foster this sense of community amongst its users.

As a side note, no one from the participants called building a dialogue with fans and customers something that plays a crucial role in the company's marketing team. Dialogue fostering was described as a complex strategy that requires a thought-through strategy which makes it an additional, advanced step in a company's overall promotional strategy. Listening to the customers and community members online, however, was described as something that any company must do.

The analysis of the gathered interviews created an image of engagement being a necessary condition of a productive outcome of the brand-community relationship. The interviewees did not seem to make this argument on purpose because this idea would always come up alongside other themes. This argument was voiced by participants once or twice but not repeated multiple times to put an emphasis on it. The argument about the role of engagement is drawn from quotations such as this one:

The company should not actively moderate the community's conversations. The company should give the community as much freedom as possible. The company should provide technical and customer support to the community. The company should listen to the community. The company should use the feedback obtained from the community and use it to improve its product.

In other words, if there is no interaction with the communities, companies cannot create new features, products, or services that the customers want to use. From the interviews, the following brand-community interaction scenario can be drawn. It is a scenario that is considered optimal and logical by the participants of the study:



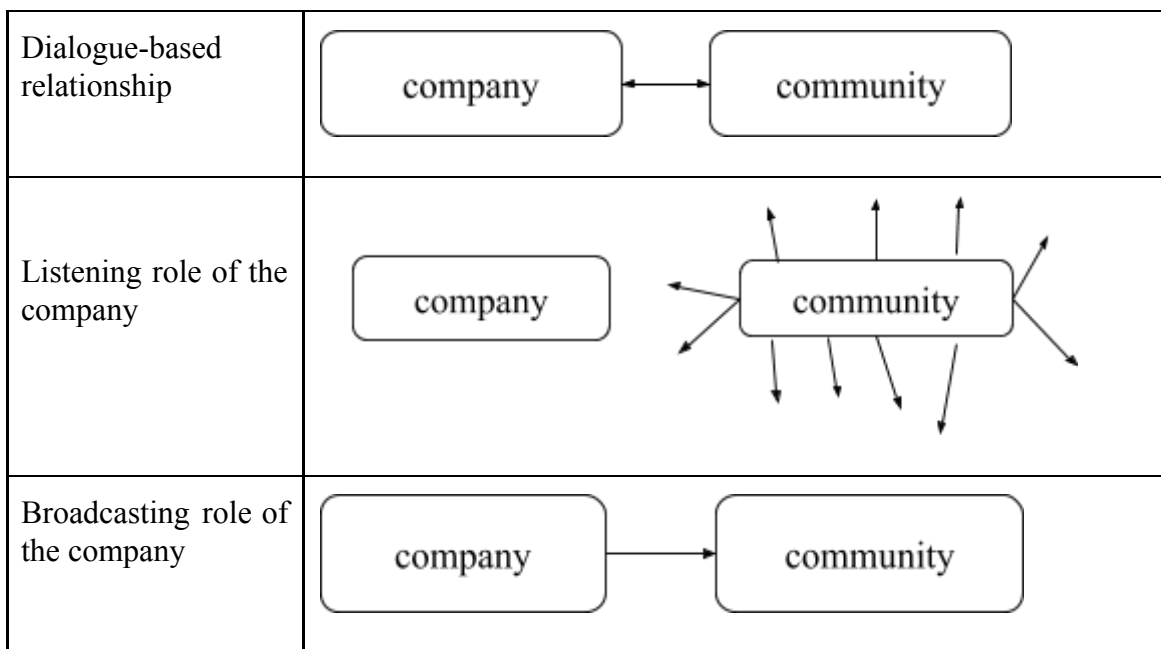
**Figure 2.** Community-brand interaction flow.

Another mentioned role that a brand can adopt in their relationship with the brand community is the broadcasting role. Just like the roles described above, this brand behaviour can include elements of other roles, for example, building dialogue. The broadcasting role implies that the brand puts out content, product, or service, and thus leads the brand community. In the interviews, an example from the retail industry was brought up:

As a tribal brand, it means that, for its target audience, [Company Name] is a trendsetter: its selection of home goods, clothes, beauty products or delicacies tells its target audience what is a must-have in this season, what is prestigious to consume.

The broadcasting role means that it is not just the brand that takes on this mission. The brand audience expects the brand to broadcast the trends or discussion topics and wants to be “told” what to consume or be concerned with.

In the following figure, schemes of the company-community relationships derived from the data are presented.



**Figure 3.** Roles of companies in the company-brand community relationships.

The participants that mentioned the dialogue-based interaction between brands and communities spoke of particular closeness that may develop between them. This closeness was not mentioned or alluded to when discussing cases of brands that do not interfere with the communities. Therefore, “closeness” between the company and the fans is a unique feature of the dialogue-based relationship.

In relation to this theme, participants expressed the following ideas. One of them said that the brand wants to be “very close to the customer”. Although a customer is not always the same person as a fan community member, this quote points at the motivation behind the brand's actions which is revenue. Another aspect of “closeness” is the similarity of the brand-community relationship to a relationship between two close people. One participant said that brands should “make it feel personal and likeable” referring to the content that the companies release. Another participant argued:

You can offer your help if it's wanted and in that sense like your role is not to create a favourable image of yourself in that community, your role is to help them do whatever they please in that community.

This kind of help may go beyond basic customer service, as it follows from this quote. It sounded like the participant was talking about helping someone to grow, connect with like-minded people, draw inspiration or empowerment from their participation in the community.

In general, it is worth mentioning how the participants spoke about a company's strategy when it comes to dealing with online communities. Participants mentioned concrete cases as examples of brand behaviour that they approved of, it was something they liked from their own work experience or from a brand they follow online. At the same time, the participants used very generic case descriptions when talking about things brands should not do when interacting with the communities.

The section on the community-company relationship would not be complete without mentioning possible conflicts between companies and brand communities. This is one of the topics that was only mentioned briefly in the interviews. Four participants said that when putting resources into community development, their company had the overall goal to serve the product users or customers or to engage them, as opposed to pleasing just any brand fans:

The biggest difference between the player base and the community around... [the game] is that the players actually play the game and focus on completing levels, while community members might not be playing the game as much but they create a lot of fan art and stories around the game characters.

In practice, it means that a company makes it a priority to release the news about the product for those who use it, for example, through their official channels. Actively managing the brand community and engaging the audience there, as it logically follows from the previous statement, is considered less important by companies.

#### **4.3.3. Benefits for brands**

When studying the relationship between two parties, companies, and brand communities in particular, it is crucial to consider what each party hopes to gain and what they actually gain thanks to this relationship. When it comes to companies, their motivation — to maximise revenue — is generally clear as it is stated in the economics literature. In the conducted interviews, nobody stated the “obvious” goal of maximising revenue by adding brand community development to the companies’ activities. Companies also have sub-goals, achieving which is supposed to support the main goal of maximising revenue. These sub-goals may also be tied to brand community development.

Overall, the participants showed that they have a lot of ideas on how brand community benefits the company they work or worked for. Yet, at the same time, the participants spoke of communities in a way that implies that it is hard to quantify the results of working with them: “There is a major question about like what is the strategic relevance of your

community within the product.” The idea that is the closest to the argument about firms maximising revenue about the effect of having a brand community on the company can be summarised as it follows: if companies are nice to community members, they may get something from them in return. “Something” can be free promotion or new content that can be used by the company:

Facilitating any type of idea that comes from the community like meetups or competitions or these type of things, giving out some goodies like T-shirts or whatever so always be willing to you know accept their ideas and again facilitate that.

These are additional benefits for companies that participants mentioned regarding having a brand community. One is improving the company’s image in the fans’/users’ eyes and, as a result, increasing their loyalty or making them even happier with the service they use. Another is getting the fans to consume the company’s advertisement materials with more devotion than an average person, and, therefore, selling more products to the fans.

However, the participants seemed to hint at these ideas, expressing them between the lines. There were more direct statements, too, and they tend to focus on this benefit for companies: getting feedback on the existing and future products. The reasoning behind this being a beneficial outcome is that some fans know the product or the service inside out and can think of ways to improve it that company employees cannot. Another reason offered by participants is that the company does not have to take a risk by guessing what their customers would like, invest resources into developing or updating a product only to find out that it is not successful. Instead, the company can ask loyal users/customers what they have a demand for, develop the requested product, service or feature which is more likely to be successful:

At least in the long term, the company should listen to the community to give the general direction whether for example where the app should go or the product should go because those are the people that use the product every day. They know it very well; they know what they want from the product.

Two more benefits for the brands were mentioned once each, but they deserve attention, nonetheless. One is having a brand community around a mobile game that already has a social component, so that the community would be enhancing the game experience for the users, extending it. Another reason is that the environment in which companies and consumers exist now has become transparent. By having a dialogue with a brand community, revealing some company news to the community first is one way for firms to comply with the rules of the game and earn a reputation of a transparent organisation.

#### **4.4. Image of brand communities**

The final major theme that was detected in the interviews is an incomplete, somewhat blurry image of what it is like to participate in a brand community. Compared to two other second-order themes that were detected in the data, the third theme was less prevalent, yet it deserves attention. The participants spoke rather briefly about what happens inside brand communities themselves compared to other topics. However, this briefness and at times generic image tells us that the said theme is present yet sporadic for the interviewees. This theme is important to include in the analysis as it completes the way participants see brand communities from different angles.

Participants spoke about the structure of brand communities, the benefits of being a member, and community activities. When describing communities themselves, all participants used some comparisons and metaphors which are analysed in this chapter as well.

At this point, it is worth noting that all discussed cases but one was called “true communities” by the participants. The case with the lack of a true or developed community was the one from the retail industry. In Participant B’s opinion, their company is “far behind from where they could be” in terms of brand community development. Yet, the interviewee emphasized their point that local customers consider the brand a unique feature of their culture and therefore are motivated to unite and “help” the company. In this section, this retail case is analysed alongside other cases. The features that make this case



different from other brand communities help gain a deeper understanding of their image in the eyes of the participants.

#### **4.4.1. Community activities**

Another context in which participants mentioned engagement was when they talked about the interaction between ordinary members within the community, and participants see it as vivid and constant. This theme was much less prevalent, unlike the previous topic of brand-community relationship. The participants did not talk much about the interaction of community members purely with each other; instead, they talked a lot about how community members engage with each other reacting to something the brand had put out.

Interviewees mentioned the following things that community members tend to do the most when interacting with each other. In a community of people who use the product or service behind the brand, for example, a mobile application, there is a lot of discussion about the product itself. According to the participants, fans ask each other questions about using the product the best way, share exciting achievements they've unlocked, or request tips when they encounter problems etc. This kind of interaction was described in a rather generic way that implied that this is the prevalent kind of activity in online brand communities.

Other notable activities mentioned are sharing fan art and advocating for the brand. One example of fan art was from a group where people shared video recordings of themselves playing something on a musical instrument. It was described as a "teaching environment which people record themselves not very much to do to be on the stage, but to show others their progresses and so that they can get feedback". Such posts would usually get a lot of support and encouragement. Another example of fan art is from a mobile game community. The game has different characters who originally did not have names or developed backstories. The fans have been posting their drawings of characters, coming up with the names for some characters, writing stories about the characters' past and so on.

The third type of interaction came from company-branded communities of telecommunications professionals. In these groups in social media, users share their

insights about what works best, what kinds of products could be developed, and give feedback to other industry peers as well as to the company that runs the community.

Interviewees occasionally used metaphors and comparisons when describing communities, their activities, and the atmosphere they create. The comparisons do not always fall into other analysis categories, yet these quotations also contribute to the image of brand communities.

Participant C who worked with a community of people learning to play musical instruments said there was a “teaching environment”. Community members would often post videos of themselves playing a new piece they had mastered. The participant thought they did it not to “be on the stage” but to share how they felt after learning something new, get feedback and encourage others to do the same because everyone in the community was “on the same boat”: “It feels like a class in a way.” While some moments that the Participant described do resemble a classroom, the whole process also sounds like a journey for many people, where the process may matter more than the result (completion of a course).

Another comparison came up when discussing online communities around games and offline meetups organised for them by the company. A participant described the reason why players want to get together with their communities in real life: “It’s like in every relationship really like you know if you meet somebody online after a while you want to meet them in person.” Later, that participant added that small player communities were “like a group of friends”. When describing those online communities as a group with “real-life” relations, however, the participant did not explain what makes these people be like friends, what unites them besides the passion for the game and why. Besides, a real-life friendship or another relationship also implies doing something for others, but there was no mention of that in the interview. The participant may have meant that the community gives a feeling of a group of friends rather than actual friendship: “You always have a clan that you feel part of.” What the participant described sounded like a feeling of belonging to a group, being one of them, always being welcome back, a feeling that you are expected to show up for a game campaign.

Two other participants mentioned how they called brand communities in their companies. In the retail company that one participant worked for, they used to have a program called The Customer Experts. The program was supposed to turn customers into a community, and its name shows that the company employees still saw the brand community as an even more loyal group of product consumers. Another participant admitted that in their work team, they do not use the term community but instead talk about audience engagement or certain customer and user groups. These quotes are partly related to the theme of the conflict of interests between communities and brands. The contradiction between wanting to develop a brand community yet treating it as the company's most loyal users or customers may indicate that the representatives of the companies are not always fully committed to the idea of a proper community.

The next theme that is relevant to the discussion of brand communities is people benefitting from participating in a brand community. At first, it seemed that the participants did cover this topic, however, the theme was not fully present in the interviews. To sum it up, connecting with others, sharing something with them and getting support from them was commonly named the main benefit of being a member. Getting something exclusive from the company like T-shirts, closed live streams or other experiences organised for the community was another benefit that was mentioned.

When listing the things that people get from being in a brand community, participants named the things that at the same time are beneficial from consuming the product or service behind the brand. The topic was not explored in detail in the interviews which contributed to a somewhat blurry image of brand communities conveyed by the participants. For example, when talking about a community of people who use a mobile app to learn to play musical instruments, the participant said that people were empowered by learning a new skill and practising it together. When discussing a retail brand which did not have a developed community around it, another participant shared their vision of a community, in which people can get help with solving everyday problems, like organising a party for their children. In other words, being a part of such a community would be an addition to being a customer at a shop where you can purchase different things, it would be something that would add a new benefit to members' lives.

#### **4.4.2. Structure of brand communities**

Participants discussed the structure of different brand communities they have encountered in their career. When it comes to structure, the following features were mentioned: size of a community, how homogeneous the community is when it comes to member location, interests or profile, and possible coexistence with other communities around the same brand that have the same or different features. The participants described cases when there is one big brand community, a lot of relatively small communities around the same brand and a combination of small, medium-sized communities that belong to one big community.

The first case type — one big community that unites all fans of the brand. This case was described by the participant who had worked in the education industry. It is worth noting that the industry does not define the structure of brand communities, but industries are mentioned in this section to provide some background to the examples.

One community that was discussed is a community of people who practise playing musical instruments. The communication within that social media group worked out so that people who played different instruments posted videos of themselves performing, asking questions and sharing tips most of which can be relevant to any member. According to the interviewee, it was the shared experience and the feelings that united fans, not the technique they used when playing an instrument:

The decision that the fans took was to keep just one unique group because they said we are one big family in a way, and we want to be together and it doesn't matter which instrument you play.

If it is the company who decides how to develop a community, it can influence what it will look like and how it will be organised structure-wise. One participant said that their company preferred to target one big community of consumers and fans because it was less risky than targeting small groups. A very different case is the one when there are a lot of communities of various sizes around one brand. It may be the company or the fans who take the initiative and shape the communities to be the size they like, or it may happen

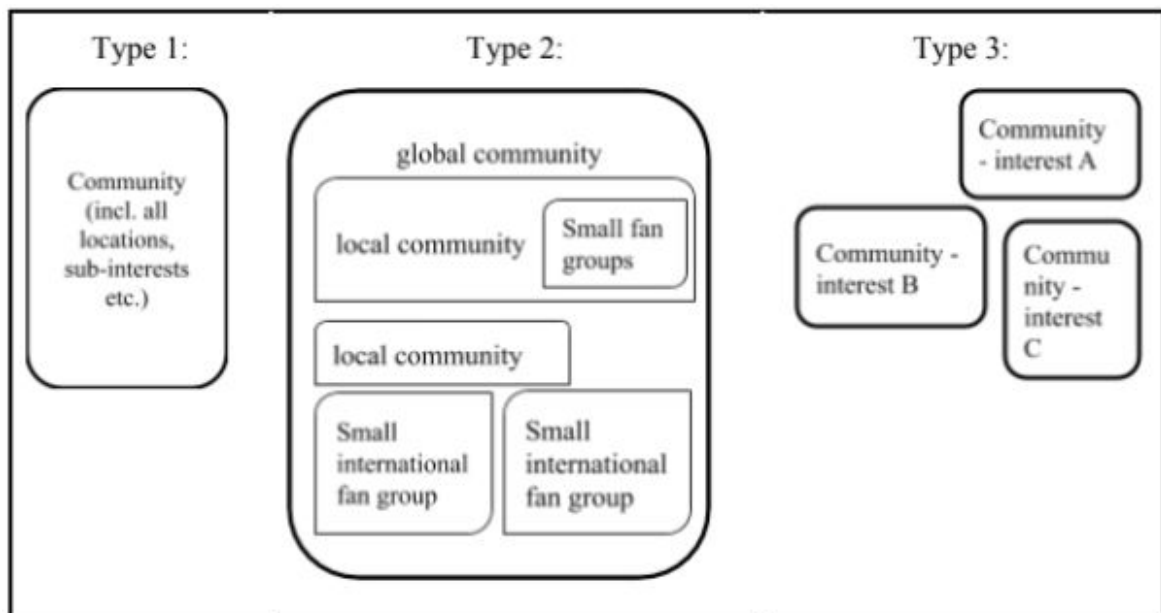
naturally and gradually. One way, intentionally or unconsciously, to set the direction for community development is to provide a certain platform. For example, a company or a fan can create a closed Facebook/LinkedIn group where someone decides whether to accept a new member or not or create a forum on a separate website where anybody can register, post messages or just lurk.

A case when there are a lot of communities of various sizes around one brand was described by two participants who worked in the gaming industry. They talked about a company that develops a few games, each game has a big separate community around it, and within the community, people form medium and small groups. The whole community around one game may be global and huge in terms of the number of people, yet there are activities for the global community such as online events or game discussions. Players also form local communities where they attend local meetups and communicate with each other in the local language. Also, players who interact with each other in the game e.g. playing as one “team”, form a long-term connection: “You always have a clan that you feel part of and so with those people you want to connect even outside the game.” The usage of the word clan is notable here. Clans are what the game developers called those player groups. The original, literal meaning of the word, i.e. a large family with strong connections, and the figurative meaning of any group with strong bonds gives the word clan a more complex connotation in the context of how players feel in a game community.

When there are a few or many communities around the same brand, they are likely to differ in the way their members behave and communicate with others. One participant named a reason behind this observation. If there are a lot of small communities and groups around one brand, most or all of them have been started by the fans, not the company. If the groupings are not managed in the same way and have the same agenda, their members’ behaviour varies too. Another interviewee called people starting their own community around the brand “the greatest gift you can get”. The third participant said, “it’s more important that there are unofficial communities around [the company]”. The reason is that the company has succeeded in releasing such a demanded product or service that causes such an emotional response in people that they feel the need to connect with others, as it follows from another quotation.

One participant described a case when a telecommunications brand had separate communities for different people or interests around it. Regular consumers form one community which looks like people online and offline sharing their enthusiasm about the company's products and buying and using them. Then, there is a global community of employees who connect with each other in social media. The third type of community around the same brand is business-to-business themed. There are closed groups in social media where experts from different companies in the same industry discuss their professional interests. This case shows that the company has put a lot of effort to shape most of the communities around it, at least, the second and the third type of communities, following its agenda and incentivising people to join. Compared to this case, other examples described in the interviews sound like the communities there developed in a more chaotic, less controlled way, which made their structure and purpose different.

Below is a figure that contains schemes of the brand community structures retrieved from the data set. These community structure schemes do not cover all possible options but illustrate the cases that the participants described.



**Figure 4.** Brand community structures. Community structure type 1: all fans are united on the same platform / in one group. Community structure type 2: big community that includes a lot of smaller groups with the same interests. Community structure type 3: a few communities around one brand, grouped by different interests.

In any community, there are members who are more active and more passive which reflects the internal structure of the group. A few participants noted this observation from the cases they had worked with, but their comments did not reveal much besides the following. Active members start conversations and react to what other members and brand representatives are saying, while passive members engage rarely or just lurk. One participant added that it is still worth targeting passive community members with promotional materials but not “bombard” people with messages. All participants focused on talking about the active part of the brand communities and, as it follows from their words, that was their focus at work also.

Some communities overlap with other communities which may be bigger or smaller, form around other brands or areas of interest. For instance, members of a community devoted to mobile game A can engage with a community around console game B and take part in local festivals or conventions for the global or national community of gamers. Two participants briefly mentioned generic cases similar to the described scenario but did not go into details.

The data do not contain frequent mentions of other conditions or social agents that surround brand communities and affect them. In other words, companies and brand communities were discussed without mentioning almost anything else that may be relevant to either party.

Participant A, who had worked with a retail brand said it was associated with a certain status in the society, appreciation of comfort and quality in people’s private lives, and that the customer loyalty had decreased. The participant explained that the changes in the local economy and shopping behaviour had affected the company supporters and consumers in general in a way that loosened their bond with the brand. Other mentions of the “outside world” came up when discussing a telecommunications company with two participants. One of them remembered the changes that happened to the company a few years ago that had to do with a major change in its business strategy and the products it released. This memory was mentioned in relation to the brand fans who, a few years later, post social media comments related to the “old” company rather than the “renewed” one. The same

participant was also the one who said that companies and communities now exist in the transparent environment — another feature of the environment both parties are in. Finally, another interviewee described the business-to-business themed closed communities on social media where the representatives of the telecommunications company engage with other professionals from the field. This mention reveals that there is a world of professionals from other companies all over the world out there, that the discussed company exists in the global context of its industry. Other than that, there were no mentions of the kind of the world that the companies and the communities coexist in.



## **5. Discussion**

The research problem that guided this study is how brand communities are seen from marketing professionals' perspective. On the one hand, there is a substantial amount of research on some features of brand communities. On the other hand, existing research has focused primarily on giving voice to brand community members, measuring impact of brand communities on business, particularly consumer behaviour and the business-consumer relationship, and defining best practices in building brand communities. The goal of the study is to extract the image of brand communities that marketing professionals believe is real in order to see what guides the people who have control over brand communities. In this chapter, I provide interpretations of the data based on what was said during the interviews, with no initial hypothesis directing the report, following the key themes outlined in the Analysis chapter. The significance of the results is evaluated and put into context of previous research and theory, and possible alternative explanations are offered.

### **5.1. Interviewees' feelings about communities**

Participants shared a significant amount of statements reflecting their feelings and personal experiences with brand communities. Participants' personal take on brand communities formed one second-order theme that emerged from the data. Overall, conducted interviews reflected that participants saw brand communities as something that had become part of many people's lives. For example, participants at least once in their life prior to the time of the interview considered themselves members of some brand communities. Also, the way participants spoke about brand communities was something that concerns many people, is massive in size, present in many spheres of life such as entertainment, career etc.

This finding is in line with the opinion expressed by most researchers of the subject, for example, Humphrey, Laverie and Rinaldo (2015) who state that brand community is a prominent form of the consumer-brand relationship. Moreover, participants listed all features that make a group a brand community that the scholars name. Participants gave examples of hobbies related to certain brands that unite some communities, explained how

brand consumption encourages people to interact with each other, creates an emotional response, allows the members to pursue certain goals together. In other words, the brand community cases described by the participants illustrate the definitions of such groups coined in the existing literature.

Another question that was raised in all interviews was whether the interviewees consider themselves to be part of the fan communities of the companies they worked for, or any other brand communities. Almost all participants said that they were part of some community in the past, prior to their employment at the discussed companies or the interviews, in a passive, lurking role. Participants themselves did not mention having strong feelings typical for fan community members, strong positive emotions such as the feeling of empowerment, excitement about the brand and talking to their peers.

One way to explain this finding is that when speaking about something that took place a few years ago, participants' memories of their feelings, possibly strong at some point in the past, became subdued. Another way to explain the finding is that participants did not have strong feelings towards the communities, to begin with. The latter explanation, combined with the confirmation from participants that they were mostly lurking, not engaging with others, may be more plausible than the former. Moreover, participants mostly felt somewhat distant from the communities they had to deal with at work. This is another observation that supports the argument that actively participating in any brand community activities is an idea that is foreign to the interviewed marketing professionals.

The topic of people's feelings, motivation guiding individual behaviour in online brand communities is covered in the literature. Sociology publications mention the feelings and motivation of the members of regular communities (e.g. the need for self-expression, identity creation, construction of meaning, pursuing an interest or goal (Castells, 2010) and the joy from fulfilling these needs). From the psychological point of view, if consumers have strong emotions from an experience, they choose to endure such experience in order to avoid boredom, for example, see a movie (Andrade, 2015, p. 94). By extension, participating in a brand community gives consumers additional emotional experience. This is how interviewees described the reason why people joined the brand communities we

discussed. Communities made people feel a certain way, whether it was feeling flattered because of encouragement and attention your art received or being accepted to a high-status group. By contrast, interviewed brand-affiliated professionals do not fully relate to brand communities they work with, this study found. Participants gave an outsider's perspective on what guides brand community members.

Engaged brand communities have become a constant factor in establishing the trust in consumer-brand relationships (Habibi, Laroche and Richard, 2014). The influence of brand communities was acknowledged by the participants of this study too. The way they spoke about brand communities was that of something well established, something that had become an important part of the marketing and business landscape. This image of brand communities was drawn, for example, by the means of not comparing the role of online groups to other forms of engagement and revenue generation.

In the context of participants' work duties, participants mostly spoke about brand communities positively and with a hint of astonishment. This is important, as it tells us that participants see brand communities as a positive factor in the brand-customer relationship, something that gives companies more opportunities to build a bond with consumers. This finding contrasts some academic publications that see brand communities as potential opposition and competition to the companies behind the brands (Cova and White, 2010). Participants sounded confident enough in themselves as professionals and in their employers not to be threatened by the communities. Furthermore, the amusement in the participants' words may be related to the following arguments. First, brand communities, especially big ones, are not controlled by companies and, therefore, the members' behaviour and its consequences are often unexpected but, at least in the cases participants described, positive for the companies. Second, participants called brand communities beneficial to brands and to the participants and their peers themselves, since brand communities' activity makes the jobs of the interviewees "easier". Brand community members may voluntarily or unconsciously participate in word-of-mouth marketing, generate content and ideas that marketing teams use. These factors may have shaped their attitude towards brand communities.

One's personal values at least partly penetrate their professional activities, in this case, development of brand communities. As was presented in the findings section, participants demonstrated that they see brand communities from an individualistic perspective. This finding helps raise questions for future studies, such as whether marketing professionals' values have any impact on brand community members' wellbeing and interests. Previous studies have investigated individual motivations to participate in regular communities and brand communities specifically. These motivations are social solidarity, value co-creation and symbolic consumption (Arnould and Thompson, 2007).

There is little research on passive community members — the ease of studying and the focus on the active, engaged consumers is more urgent and obvious both for academics and businesses. Unexpectedly, participants of this study helped to shed light on the passive, lurking community member behaviour by talking about their personal preferences.

## **5.2. Communities and brands**

Another second-order theme that emerged in the data covered the relationship between brands and brand communities. The participants of this study have presented various aspects of the process of how brand communities form. Participants spoke of such aspects of the process as people's motivation, the party that controls and directs the process and external conditions that facilitate community development. Participants described the process of how brand communities are created — either developed by a company or emerge by themselves. In the literature, the process of community building tends to be presented as a controlled, established process. For example, Brint (2001) writes that “tightly knit groups typically employ each of these mechanisms for strengthening group ties”; mechanisms such as using ritual occasions, common meeting places, or designated times for interaction. Such wording implies that community members or brand representatives are aware of such mechanisms of building a community. Meanwhile, if we investigate a case of a brand community that developed spontaneously, likely with no one supervising the process with the goal of creating a community in mind, this may not be the case. An example of such a case is a brand community around a mobile game that eventually formed on a third-party forum-type of platform founded by an ordinary game

fan. In other words, the unpredictability and spontaneity of such a community development path are not covered by previous studies sufficiently. Existing literature is lacking the documentation and analysis of how exactly brand communities develop, what driving forces and triggers influence the process. Therefore, the findings of this study contribute to a fuller picture of brand communities. Previous literature focuses on describing and analysing the brand community cases that have already become established. This study, however, provides a glimpse at the community development process due to the fact that selected interviewees shared their observations of the subject.

The question of what makes people want to connect with others in order for them to form interest-based communities around brands has been discussed in the literature. Classic sociology works describe the reasons why people want to form communities. Brint (2001) compares two lines of development of the community concept created by Durkheim and Toennies and lists what makes people want to join communities, for example, it is search of identity or desire to have frequent interactions and form emotional bonds. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) mention that consumption communities are formed by communal affiliation for consumers. At the same time, studies about brand communities specifically tend to list the particularities of brand communities in a way that focuses on the aftermath of being a member of one rather than what makes people join a community in the first place. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) write about "three essential markers of community (consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility)" that they found present in the brand communities they analysed. This is an example of such an angle, the authors are writing about the features that are present in a formed community. These things may have been something future community members had aspired to have in their life before they joined it, but this is not clearly stated in the cited research.

My analysis captured what, according to marketing professionals, drives people to seek brand communities. The finding can be summarised as it follows: people join brand communities because they desire to connect with others who consume the same product. This is, on the one hand, a simple and obvious observation shared by participants. On the other hand, it indicates that brand fans may not have complex needs at the beginning, and they discover the benefits of being a brand community member after joining one that they

did not anticipate. Alternatively, this observation shared by participants may also indicate that brand representatives see community members' wishes as quite simplified. Overall, this finding is in line with both the classic sociological approach and literature on modern brand communities, but the answer may not be full and could benefit from more studies.

One participant also talked about a case of a brand's product that gave its users an empowering, an opportunity to learn a new skill and thus express oneself in a new way. Empowerment is an important outcome of participating in a brand community and it has been mentioned in the literature, however, in a different context. Some studies (Katz and Heere, 2015; Acar and Puntoni, 2016) focus on consumer empowerment. In this context, empowerment means the ability to influence the brands, get involved in the marketing or even product development process. I argue that empowerment of individuals in the areas of life that are not based on consuming commercial products needs to be studied more.

Overall, many themes that emerged in conversations with participants occur in research papers on the subject of brand communities and virtual communities. The participants of this study contributed cases and examples that correspond to the older literature. Besides that, however, participants of this study did not provide solely brands' perspective on communities. They spoke of community management practices that both benefit brands and community members as consumers and private individuals. Moreover, participants also share their position of the people who are not members of any brand communities in their private lives. This result is unexpected given that interviewees are brand-affiliated actors. Yet, this result may be plausible when interviewees appear to be well-educated professionals who demonstrate some critical thinking and multi-faceted perception of the subject, which they did.

When this study was designed, it was expected that it would contrast other brand community studies by adopting an analytical rather than a practical perspective. While this contrast did become apparent, another difference in the angle of research emerged as well. Many research papers on brand communities analyse the phenomenon from the brands' perspective. The findings are often presented in relation to brand loyalty (Marzocchi, Morandin and Bergami, 2013) or consumer trust (Casaló, Flavián and Guinalú, 2007).

Even brand community members' emotions, the benefits associated with participation in a brand community tend to be analysed in relation to the businesses' perspective. Moreover, Cova and White (2010) call some brand communities "capable of developing potentially dangerous opposition and/or competitive offerings". My study takes the opposite approach to balance the studies on brand communities and shift focus to the interests of their members rather than businesses.

Other unexpected results retrieved from analysis concern the topic of values. From participants' words, it was possible to induce their values related to the subject and the values they see as related to being a community member. Overall, participants described community participation as something associated with altruistic values, while for them personally, it was the individualistic set of values that mattered more. Participants got a voice and told about their personal values which they might project on brand communities they work with. Participants also spoke about the situations in their companies when a community manager is faced with a new issue within a community and has to decide what is the right thing to do, for example, how to resolve a conflict between members. In situations like that, it is company guidelines, values and the individual worker's values that guide their decision. Values play a crucial role in how marketing professionals such as participants or their colleagues run brand communities.

This question of what values do marketing professionals in the change of brand community management uphold has not been raised in the literature. It may be worth investigating in future studies, as clashing values may potentially signal an existing or upcoming conflict of interests between the parties and mutual dissatisfaction. The brand communities that participants described are the ones that exist in symbiosis with the companies behind brands, and elimination of conflicts is essential for such relationships. There are readings in line with critical perspectives on promotional culture that are related to the subject of the conflict of interests between community members and companies. The critical aspect is reviewed in further sections. However, the problem of the clash of values not between an organisation and people but between people playing different roles needs to be studied as well.

Furthermore, the findings cover participants' thoughts on the best tactics for companies to manage and nurture brand communities. Listening and mentoring company roles were named, and participants expressed their views on when a certain type of behaviour may work best. In the listening role, the company's goal is to let fans have the community platform, the company's resources to have fun under the agenda they set and do what they feel like. At the same time, when fans have a lot of space and are fond of the brand, it is common for them to start telling others about it. For the company, it means it can take advantage of fans' enthusiasm and the free promotional work, word-of-mouth marketing they do. Such a dual situation is arguably controversial from the community members. Listening behaviour, on the one hand, can be seen as "altruistic" behaviour for companies — they provide resources to the community, listen to their opinions, consider them in product development etc. On the other hand, when fans start doing promotional work for the company, have their ideas used for product improvement, they do not get the same credit and pay that company employees would. Moreover, as mentioned in the Literature chapter, one way to look at firms is that their only goal is to maximise their profits (Coase, 1937) which makes everything they do non-altruistic, or "selfish". Therefore, in the scenario described above, companies may be taking advantage of community members who are not aware of it.

Another brand community management strategy was described as mentoring, facilitating, mediating, or guiding. The goal behind that strategy is to build a relationship between the company and community thus turning fans into customers for life. On the one hand, from the community point of view, in this scenario, the company plays a controlling, dominating role. Community members, therefore, have formal rules limiting what they cannot do and therefore might have less space to express themselves. This is not necessarily a negative feature for the community. A pro, however, is that a company that is more present at the community platform may give people more perks, more special attention, for example, share exclusive information, arrange events, or provide new products to test. What else makes this kind of a role not necessarily threatening to the community is that such a relationship is more defined and arguably honest. When setting up the platform and the guidelines, the company makes it clear from the beginning that they will participate or shape community activities. Therefore, it is less likely that community members are taken



advantage of unknowingly as they are aware that the company processes the feedback they gave or uses content generated in the community in marketing.

User engagement was mentioned often when talking about the brand-community relationship. Overall, participants demonstrated the ability to think critically and compare the positions and interests of different stakeholders we discussed with them, thus creating a multidimensional vision of brand communities. One topic that, despite that, was covered in a one dimensional way was engagement. To sum it up, participants spoke of engagement only as something that in the end is beneficial to participants' team's work and their companies. Engagement can also be seen as an indication of the community members' excitement about interacting with each other, finding new meanings of their identities, the participants spoke of that aspect very briefly and still in the context of it benefitting the company and the employees behind the brand.

To summarise, there are pros and cons to each company role that participants described when it comes to community management and, ultimately, wellbeing. In terms of values, both roles have a unique combination of "selfish" and "altruistic" values. The brands that the interviewees work for or watch from a distance can either stick to either type of online behaviour or combine both. When it came to what brands should and should not do, the participants tended to portray a listening strategy as more favourable. It is worth noting that the interviewed participants demonstrated more of a "selfish" attitude when it comes to their participation in brand communities. Depending on whom participants relate to more, the firm or the brand fans, again, there may be a clash of values between marketing professionals and companies they work for. For example, there is a dissonance between participants' positions as employees and their opinion that companies should behave altruistically when it comes to communities, give more than take, as this approach may not be the most effective business-wise.

### **5.3. Critical perspective**

The data suggest that participants' perception of brand communities was rather complex, yet it lacked critical perspective. Overall, participants' viewpoint cannot be called negative

towards the practices of branding, developing brand communities, and the outcomes for brand members and companies behind the brands. Participants gave a neutral-to-positive image of brand communities as they see them. In academic literature, there is a lot of material covering popular and successful branding and community building strategies. The brand community perception of this study's participants corresponds with such studies a lot. However, in opposition to a practical perspective on marketing practices, an alternative angle has developed in research as well. This perspective was not reflected in participants' image of the subject, and the implications of this conclusion are discussed below.

Academics have expressed concerns about the spread of promotional culture over everyday communication (Aronczyk and Powers, 2010). The participants of this study, marketing professionals who influence brand community management at their companies, did not express such a concern. The implication of this observation may be that participants do not acknowledge the arguably harmful and destructive actions their employers do by eroding traditional communities with their branding. As Powers and Pattwell (2015) state, brands are often portrayed as undying, and the words of this study's participants go in line with this perspective. However, Powers and Pattwell argue that brands do age and disappear from consumers' minds forever. Consequently, brand communities that mean a lot to their members might be gone too, but this concern about the future was not expressed in the interviews.

The readings that are relevant to the topic of this thesis concern the concepts of consumer society in general and promotional culture in particular. To begin with the discussion of consumer society, it is worth mentioning that such society is characterised by a shift in the meaning of consuming goods and services. A necessity for survival no longer defines how sought after a consumer product is. Instead, other features such as status, novelty or entertainment factor define how consumers estimate the importance of acquiring a product (Kiron, Ackerman, and Goodwin, 1997). Consequently, marketing of goods is no longer based on talking about the obvious features and benefits. Instead, companies aim to create a brand which corresponds to how consumers identify themselves (Kiron, Ackerman, and Goodwin, 1997). Thus, market participation in general and brand community participation, in particular, becomes the primary way to find and express one's identity.

One participant of this study spoke of a community around a retail brand and mentioned that people strive to be part of that community because it and consuming relevant products, brands is associated with a certain status in the society. This is a typical example related to the concept of consumer society. In that case, consumers are interested in purchasing clothing or food products not because the clothes will keep them warm and the food will save them from starvation. Instead, it is the price point and the luxuriousness of the brands, feeling one with everyone who shops at that retail point that makes it desirable to be part of the community.

Half of this study's participants mostly spoke of communities around entertainment-related brands. Entertainment, at first glance, is superficial. Therefore, brand communities around entertainment may be seen as consumer activity that, unlike the concept of consumer society, does not create a new meaning such as status or novelty while forgetting the primary meaning of the service. On the other hand, however, even brand communities around entertainment services fit the concept of consumer society because, again, besides the entertainment component itself, consumers give new meanings to consuming the service and being active in the community.

Even consuming an entertainment product, for instance, a mobile game, and participating in a brand community associated with such a product can be interpreted as an aspiration to achieve a certain status. It is common that a company behind a brand asks for community feedback on the product, ideas for product development and provides unique perks to community members. All these things may make consumers feel like they are above others, they are in a unique, privileged position and that their opinion is valuable, it matters and has an impact.

Overall, it is important to acknowledge that what participants said during the interviews may have been affected by various factors. In accordance with the social constructivist approach, we can assume that participants' words do reflect the reality they believe is present. Another possibility, however, is that participants have consciously omitted some statements, arguments, and observations that they believe in and that are part of their constructed reality.

## **6. Conclusion**

There is evidence that brand fans join communities around them, companies create them and scholars' study them at an increasingly growing rate (Pedeliento, Andreini and Veloutsou, 2020). This study is one of the few conducted to date which have connected brand communities to the social construct concept created by marketing professionals. In this chapter, the results of the study are summarised, practical implications and limitations of the study are outlined. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research of brand communities.

### **6.1 Research summary**

The research questions posed in this study aim to find out how marketing professionals perceive brand communities and the relationship between brand communities and the companies. Based on a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews, it can be concluded that participants' perception of the subject is quite complex, yet it lacks a critical perspective and insight on what may drive people to participate in brand communities. The data also indicate that interviewees do not identify themselves with most brand communities which, at the same time, allowed participants to share their views as "outsiders" and still contribute to understanding brand communities better. Marketing professionals interviewed for this study shared their experiences of being lurking members and observers of brand communities which is an angle that is not used often enough in academic publications.

The methodology proved to be effective in answering the research questions. The interviews conducted in a semi-flexible form made it possible to receive answers to prepared questions and discover unexpected topics. Three major themes emerged from the data. The second-order themes that were detected in the collected data allow us to explore marketers' perception of brand communities in depth. At the same time, the thematic makeup of the interviews summarises the answers to the research questions. The first theme can be summarised as follows: participants feel distant from all brand communities. This theme allows us to understand the role and stance of marketing professionals as

mediators between communities and brands. The next theme shows that the relationship between brand communities and companies is seen by participants as symbiotic and desirable. This tells us that participants see brand community management as a positive, “useful” part of their work; this theme is logical, on the one hand, but also, interestingly, holds contradiction to the first theme. The final theme is participants drawing an incomplete and blurry profile of brand communities which shows that interviewees’ understanding and vision of the activities and engagement in brand communities is distorted.

In the end, the main purpose of nourishing brand communities for organisations is to boost their positive image and reputation and gain an economic advantage. For community managers and senior marketing managers, conducted study has some practical implications. Practitioners can deepen their understanding of brand fans’ motivation and adapt commercial methods used in branding communities taking possible clash of values and priorities of different stakeholders into consideration. Human resources managers can use these findings to gain insight into how marketing employees feel about their occupation.

## **6.2 Limitations of the study**

In this section, I outline the issues in the research validity and the limitations of the research strategy of this thesis. Qualitative research in general as well as social constructivist approach and thematic analysis method have certain limitations that are important to consider when discussing the findings and suggest directions for future studies.

First of all, the flaw that qualitative methods are accused of having is not involving numbers and statistics, tangible findings. Therefore, qualitative research is not able to reveal “what works”. However, as Brinkmann (2013) argues, it is a pro that qualitative methods allow studying “how something works”. The goal of this study is to analyse how participants, marketing practitioners, think brand communities work and allow some possible explanations and implications of the findings. Such an exploratory approach of a

qualitative study may enable future quantitative studies to ask relevant research questions and continue shedding light on the subject from a different perspective.

Second, the method of qualitative interviewing is criticised for working with subjective materials which prevents scholars from obtaining objective knowledge, as Brinkmann (2013) states. The counterargument is that analysing subjective knowledge yields valuable results when subjective materials are treated as such and a clear distinction between them and objective knowledge is made. Moreover, studying people's perception of phenomena inevitably implies working with subjectivity in their statements. The social constructivist approach emphasises that people's perceptions shape the image of reality in their eyes. In this study, data is treated as subjective statements of the participants, and the findings emphasize that they concern participants' image of the subject, not an objective reality for everybody. Additionally, the discussion of the findings suggests that there may be a clash of perceptions and values between different parties discussed in this study, namely brand community members, marketing practitioners responsible for their management and companies behind the brands. Overall, metaphorically speaking, pure objectivity may be achieved only in completely sterile laboratory conditions which are unobtainable in real life. However, Brinkmann (2013) argues that it does not mean that the imperfect and subjective reality around us should not be researched.

Another factor that may reduce a study's reliability is the researcher's involvement. The researcher is the tool to obtain the interviews and analyse them, therefore, they may skew the materials and the findings with their bias. To reduce possible bias, I followed the steps of thematic research of qualitative interviews as documented in methodology literature, describing my steps in designing the research, obtaining, and processing the data. Additionally, I do not base this study on a predetermined hypothesis in order to give voice to participants and see to what results the data analysis leads.

The next feature limiting the scope of this study is a small sample size. It is common for qualitative interviewing to be based on a few cases. Thus, there are concerns that such studies cannot be expanded due to the lack of statistical generalisability. To compensate for that, analytic generalisation is involved in the interpretation of the results, as

Brinkmann (2013) recommends. This study does not suggest that the findings can be generalised to all marketing practitioners in Finland. Instead, shedding light on the cases and processing them analytically has the value of novelty. The subject is something that has been overlooked in previous studies, and the discussion of findings suggests which ones may be typical and which are a discovery.

The choice of the research paradigm makes a distinctive influence on an overall research design and the results. The final feature of the research strategy used in this thesis that limits its methodological assumptions is social constructivism. As Patel (2012) writes, each research paradigm “implies the hierarchical categorisation of assumptions with ones about the nature of reality put onto the highest pedestal”. The limitation within social constructivism is in the assumption that there are multiple constructed realities, and for researchers, it is not possible to separate the knower and the known, the cause from the effect. However, by studying brand communities under different paradigms, scholars make multidimensional contributions to the knowledge about the phenomenon.

### **6.3 Suggestions for further research**

Based on the gap in previous literature on brand communities, the answers to the research questions of this thesis and its limitations, I suggest a few directions for future investigation of the phenomenon. The suggestions arise from the need to examine the framework of this study and grow the knowledge about marketers’ perception of brand communities and its implications.

In previous literature, brand community development is described as a controlled and predictable process driven by the company behind the brand and the shared values and interests of the brand fans. Participants of this study spoke of the cases that fall under this model as well as the communities that developed spontaneously. Therefore, there must be community development drivers that have not been studied in depth before, for example, behaviour models of different types of community members such as passive lurkers. Thus, there remains a need for empirical studies of brand communities in different stages of their development.

The analysis indicates that there may be a clash of values between brand representatives and how they perceive the values of brand community members. Participants value their individuality when it comes to their participation in brand communities, yet they see active engagement in community activities as something associated with altruistic values. The findings concerning values were not anticipated, they lead to new avenues to explore in future studies. It may be worth investigating whether corporate community managers' or marketing strategy designers' personal values affect brand community members in any way. Qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews or focus groups could be the foundation of the research strategy aimed at deeper exploration of the question. Additionally, the role of marketing managers is presumed to be an automatic extension of the business strategy of their company, while their participation and behaviour as private individuals remains under-researched. Last, this study puts brand communities in the context of different interpretations and attitudes in academic literature and relevant professional circles. Under the social constructivist paradigm, researchers can investigate the views on reality expressed by different stakeholders around brand communities to understand how the dynamic between them develops.



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## Appendix

### Appendix 1. Sample Questionnaire Form

Industry: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee (Title and Coded Name): \_\_\_\_\_

#### Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate. To facilitate note-taking, I would like to audiotape our conversations today. For your information, only me will be privy to the recording. Your name and the names of the companies you work(ed) for will be held confidential, I will only mention your position in my paper. Your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time.

You have been selected to be interviewed because you have been identified as someone who has expertise on how Finnish brands build international communities online. My Master's thesis as a whole focuses on this topic, with a particular interest in your personal take. I am trying to learn more about the perception of brand communities by marketing professionals like you. I have planned this interview to last up to one hour. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover.

1. Briefly describe your role as it relates to forming and applying the community-building strategy of your company.
2. Do you think there is a community around your brand/company?
3. If yes, how would you describe this community?
4. What, do you think, makes it a real community and not a random group of people?
5. What is the company's strategy/position towards building or supporting the community?
6. How, in your opinion, is it working out?
7. Is there anything this particular company should be doing differently, in your opinion?

8. What are the everyday tasks that you and your colleagues do when working with the community?
9. How important is user engagement in this community?
10. Would you say that you are a member of this community or any other brand community?
11. Given that (the answer to question 10), is it easy for you to work with the community?
12. What do you think about working with the passive part of the community?
13. Are there any inside guidelines on community building in your company? Should they exist?
14. How do your colleagues talk about community building around your company online?
15. In your opinion, is it at all possible to create a fan community around your organization considering the industry, types of services etc?
16. There is an opinion that Finnish companies are bad at brand community management. Do you agree with that? If yes, why is that?

#### Conclusion Protocol

I think these are all questions I wanted to ask you, thank you for the participation. Do you have any further comments?

#### Appendix 2. Coding frame

Second-order themes	First-order concepts	Examples of codes
<b>Participants feel distant from all brand communities</b>	Interviewees' feelings about being a member of communities	"Personally I don't like, I don't feel the need to have big engagement and have the time to engage with a community. My questions, my answers, so I get any kind of question that pretty much I have answers for online."
	Interviewees' feelings about working with	"I don't have any challenges interacting with the community because I am not an

	brand communities	active member in that community.”
<b>Symbiotic relationship between brand communities and companies</b>	Benefits for the brands	“Facilitating any type of idea that comes from the community like meet ups or competitions or these type of things, giving out some goodies like T-shirts or whatever so always be willing to you know accept their ideas and again facilitate that.”
	Interaction between communities and brands	“Look at the Facebook page for example, you can see that every post they put out, there is quite a lot of interaction.”
	Creation of communities	“The social mechanics of games have also made communities more important and that’s what we notice also that okay if there is a social element to your game then that is one of the key ingredients to creating a functioning community.”
	Conflicts	“The biggest difference between the player base and the community around... [the game] is that the players actually play the game and focus on completing levels, while community members might not be playing the game as much but they create a lot of fan art and stories around the game characters.”
<b>Incomplete and blurry profile of brand communities</b>	Community structure	“The decision that the fans took was to keep just one unique group because they said we are one big family in a way and we want to be together and it doesn’t matter which instrument you play.”
	Benefits for community members	Interviewer: Do I understand that it feels that Yousician is a company that kind of gives the users the power to do something that they were unable to before and that inspired them to do other things? Interviewee: Yeah that’s correct.
	Community activities	“Teaching environment which people record themselves not very much to do to be on the stage, but to show others their progresses and so that they can get feedback.”
	Metaphors and comparisons describing	“It feels like a class in a way.”

	communities	
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### **Appendix 3. Interview consent form**

Media and Communication Studies  
Department of Social Research  
University of Helsinki

Master's thesis title: Brand communities around Finnish companies: a qualitative study on marketing professionals' perception

Researcher: Valeriya Kushchuk

The interview will take around 30 minutes. We don't anticipate that there are any risks associated with your participation, but you have the right to stop the interview or withdraw from the research at any time.

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of the above research project. Ethical procedures for academic research at the University of Helsinki require that interviewees explicitly agree to be interviewed and how the information contained in their interview will be used. This consent form is necessary for us to ensure that you understand the purpose of your involvement and that you agree to the conditions of your participation. Would you, therefore, read the accompanying information sheet and then sign this form to certify that you approve the following:

- the interview will be recorded and a transcript will be produced;
- you may request to receive a copy of the transcript in order to get the opportunity to correct any factual errors;
- the transcript of the interview will be analysed by Valeriya Kushchuk;
- access to the interview transcript will be limited to Valeriya Kushchuk and, upon request, her research supervisor;
- any summary interview content, or direct quotations from the interview, that are made available through academic publication or other academic outlets will be anonymized so

that you cannot be identified, and care will be taken to ensure that other information in the interview that could identify yourself is not revealed. The information about your work position will be present in the transcript. The name of the company the interview will be anonymized;

- the actual recording will be kept until the thesis is accepted by the university (until the researcher's graduation) and destroyed one year after that day;
- any variation of the conditions above will only occur with your further explicit approval.

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Printed Name

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Participant's Signature, Date

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Researcher's Signature, Date